

First United Methodist Church

Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Lectionary Study Guide

For use the week of March 22-28, 2021

Passion/Palm Sunday

March 28, 2021

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Isaiah 50:4-9a

⁴ The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens – wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. ⁵ The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. ⁶ I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. ⁷ The Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; ⁸ he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. ⁹ It is the Lord GOD who helps me; who will declare me guilty?

Commentary

The prophet Isaiah served a people in exile, a people who had serious doubts about whether they were still in God's favor. In response, the prophet preached consolation and hope that God's punishment was coming to an end and that the people would soon be restored to their homeland. This passage is one of several servant songs found in Isaiah. Some believe that the servant in this passage is the nation of Israel; others believe that it is the prophet Isaiah, or some other servant-leader who will arise in the future. Christians often interpret the servant songs as prophecy about Jesus, which is the reason this passage is used on Passion Sunday. Here, God has given the servant the tongue of a teacher, who teaches only what has been taught to him by God. The teacher is persecuted for his obedience to God and his faithful teaching of God's word, but he does not resist the persecution he faces or rebel against God. Rather, he remains obedient to God in spite of the suffering and insults, confident that he will not be disgraced or shamed because God is near. We find here an emphasis on obedience that leads through suffering to salvation. If we identify the servant as the nation of Israel, then Israel was required to suffer, not only for its own sins but also because its sacrificial suffering would be redemptive even for others. If the servant is an individual who will arise in the future, our verses might be a prophecy about the messiah-king for whom some Jews were waiting. Some Christians read this passage as prophecy about Jesus who came as a servant-teacher, who suffered in order to reveal the divine plan of judgment and restoration of God's people, and who then taught people to walk in the light of God.

Reflection

1. God gave the servant the “tongue of a teacher” that he “might sustain the weary with a word.” What does your voice reveal about you? Do your words sustain the weary or are they words of anger and ridicule? Do they build up or tear down? Do they instruct or lead astray?
2. What is the difference between suffering that is redemptive and unavoidable (or avoidable) pain that is not? How was Jesus’ suffering redemptive? What can you do to turn your suffering and that of others around you to redemptive ends?

Philippians 2:5-11

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. ⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Commentary

Paul’s ministry in Philippi began during his second missionary journey. He founded this congregation along with Silas and Timothy. After greeting the congregation and encouraging them to remain steadfast, harmonious, humble, and obedient, Paul then addressed his central concern that the Philippians remain faithful to the gospel. Some of the Jewish Christians remained strict proponents of Jewish customs and beliefs and sought to impose the requirements of circumcision on Gentile Christians. Paul cautioned the church to avoid factionalism and pride that leads to domination within relationships, and urged them to strive for unity and humility instead, after the example of Christ who left the heavenly realm, became human and a servant, and submitted to an ignoble death. This selection of Scripture is considered a great “hymn” of salvation. Christ is the great Servant Redeemer, and our lives should be lived in imitation of Christ’s humility. The early church declared that Jesus was equal with God, yet willingly emptied himself. The verb meaning “emptied” points to leaving behind his divine attributes, including his divine power, in order to carry out God’s saving mission on earth. This self-deprivation results in God raising and honoring Jesus, so that he is acknowledged by all as Lord.

Reflection

1. Christ, who was equal to God, emptied himself of all power, humbled himself and became obedient to God, even to the point of death. What does his example teach us about the faithful use of power?
2. This beautiful hymn confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord. In what way is he Lord of your life? In what ways do you struggle with Jesus’ lordship of your life?

Mark 11:1-11

¹ When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethpage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ² and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³ If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" ⁴ They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵ some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" ⁶ They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. ⁷ Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹ Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! ¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" ¹¹ Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Commentary

The final week of Jesus' ministry begins on the road that leads from the Mount of Olives to the Temple, the road where "many people spread their cloaks" (v. 8) as Jesus enters Jerusalem. Mark's primary focus during this final week is on the tension between Jesus and the Temple authorities, making it clear that Mark believes the struggle that will ultimately lead to Jesus' death concerns religious issues – specifically, who speaks God's word to the people. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims entered the city of Jerusalem every year for the festival of Passover. The excitement shown by the crowd in these verses demonstrates their hunger for salvation and their heightened awareness of God's desire for peace and justice. The Temple authorities believe they are the mediators of God's liberation for the people. But these verses indicate that the crowd is turning to Jesus as the Messiah, the one anointed by God to liberate them. The people were hoping for a renewal of society when God's anointed king would enter Jerusalem and establish true peace and justice. According to Mark, the Temple and its custodians have lost their authority and power to speak God's word of peace and justice. Written around 70 A.D., about the time Rome destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, Mark no doubt intended his readers to recognize that Jesus had taken over the arena that his opponents had once claimed for their own. A new temple will emerge in the community that Jesus brings into being. And Mark's audience is a part of this new community, this temple of justice and peace.

Reflection

1. In Jesus' time, the people were hungry for God's Kingdom of peace and justice. Today, the Church proclaims Jesus as the one anointed by God who has ushered in the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom has come in Jesus, but it has not yet been fully realized. We are still hoping for an order that will be different from the past. What has the life, death and resurrection of Jesus accomplished in this situation of waiting for a better way?
2. Conscious of his impending death on the cross, Jesus knows that crowds are not reliable. The joyful expectations for God's salvation that accompany his approach to Jerusalem left

him abandoned on the cross. This story reminds us that faith is not built on cycles of hope and disappointment, but on patient suffering and apparent lack of success. When have you experienced a time of great hope and expectation, only to be disappointed when others failed to follow through? How did that experience affect your faith?

Responsive Psalter

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

118:1 O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his steadfast love endures forever!
² Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever."

118:19 Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the LORD.

**²⁰ This is the gate of the LORD;
the righteous shall enter through it.**

²¹ I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.

**²² The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.**

²³ This is the Lord's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.

**²⁴ This is the day that the LORD has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.**

²⁵ Save us, we beseech you, O LORD!
O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!

²⁶ Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.
We bless you from the house of the LORD.

²⁷ The LORD is God,
and he has given us light.
**Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar.**

²⁸ You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God, I will extol you.

**²⁹ O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.**

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.