
CREATION TO NEW CREATION

LENTEN STUDIES

YEAR A

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“PILGRIMAGE: FROM PAIN TO LIBERTY FOR ALL.” SIXTH SUNDAY IN LENT,
PALM SUNDAY, YEAR A

Isaiah 50.4–9a; Psalm 31.9–16; Philippians 2.5–11; Matthew 27.11–54.

Isaiah 50.4–9

⁴The 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.

⁵The Lord God has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backwards.

⁶I 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.

⁷The 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;

⁸he who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.

Who are my adversaries?
Let them confront me.

⁹It is the Lord God who helps me;
who will declare me guilty?
All of them will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up.

We have noted briefly that Ezekiel lived in Babylonia during the early phases of the exile of Judeans, God's covenant people. They are there because over a long period of time they drifted away from God and God's vocation for them; to serve God's purposes to bless the nations and bring justice and mercy. They "divorced" God, left the partnership, considering it of little worth. Isaiah, who also lived in exile but later than Ezekiel, makes that case in his writings.

He also makes another case in Isaiah 49.14–16:

¹⁴But Zion said, 'The Lord has forsaken me,
my Lord has forgotten me.'

¹⁵Can a woman forget her nursing-child,
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.

¹⁶See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands;
your walls are continually before me.

The people may have left the relationship pursuing their own desires but God's desire has always been for them. He has a tattoo of them on his hands! YHWH declares his will and power to save his people from their iniquities and rebellion.

One way in which the Lord pursues his goal is through a figure called the 'servant' who is spoken of in four poems, the best known of which is Isaiah 52.12–53.12

Who the writer thought the Servant was we do not know precisely. Some have thought it was a name for collective Israel but the context here, highlighting the difference between the servant and a rebellious Israel, indicates an individual who will be the agent of redemption and do so through the prophetic vocation. Christians have found, in these passages, a way of understanding Jesus' role as a prophet and how that led to such suffering and yet redemption. It was not meaningless but full of hope.

One thing is certain the Servant will be God's prophet, who listens to the word of God, learns it, understands it and then uses it to sustain the weary; God's word comes to cheer and save (4–5). The Servant's intimate relation with YHWH expresses itself in the redemptive word. Unlike Israel the Servant is obedient to the word of YHWH and refuses to turn away from his difficult task of bringing a redemptive word to rebellious Israel.

However, the prophetic word of liberation is not well received and the Servant suffers humiliation and abuse (6). True prophets in Israel stood at the periphery of power and influence and confronted rebellion with the redemptive word that required change. They were in contest with the world and suffered.

The powers may seek to humiliate the Servant but it is God who vindicates; YHWH alone is his confidence and assurance, his vindicator. That is what gives him strength to continue to give the redeeming word to the weary. In the circumstances his view is counter-intuitive; all the power is against him and he knows that.

But so confident is he that he is prepared to stand in YHWH's court against his accusers and despisers so they may present their case and accuse him of wickedness and rebellion. He knows that the One who will prove him innocent and who justifies him is near at hand (8–9). His accusers are as insubstantial as worn-out clothes, full of moth holes. They will rot away, their lives getting thinner and thinner punctuated with holes where there is nothing at all.

While the poem describes the servant's suffering and affliction, it is deeply infused with confidence that flows from an intimate and personal relationship with God. The poem is not a complaint but a song of confidence in God's call, God's help and God's vindication. The servant is God's answer to the problem of raw evil and the uneven nature of affliction and punishment. The servant lives in the trenches with the weary and listens for the word of God to them. The message from God provokes those who do not wish to hear it. The suffering of the servant is the suffering of innocence and God will vindicate even though how that will happen is left confidently to God.

Jesus, like this writer, will confidently declare the kingdom, bear the insults and wait for vindication.

Questions: Do you have confidence that God has both the will and power to deliver you from your sin and rebellion? Is listening carefully to God's word part of your spiritual life? Do you let God 'waken your ear' morning by morning? What might be the remedy for a life that is getting thinner and full of holes?

The church sometimes like to proclaim itself prophetic and often that means using a moral megaphone pointed in the direction of some government official or politician. Do you think that is what Isaiah means? Where do think the redemptive word of the cross might fit?

Psalm 31.9–18 (APBA) 31.9–16 (NRSV, NIV)

⁹Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress;
my eye wastes away from grief,
my soul and body also.

¹⁰For my life is spent with sorrow,
and my years with sighing;

my strength fails because of my misery,
and my bones waste away.

¹¹I am the scorn of all my adversaries,
a horror to my neighbours,
an object of dread to my acquaintances;
those who see me in the street flee from me.

¹²I have passed out of mind like one who is dead;
I have become like a broken vessel.

¹³For I hear the whispering of many—
terror all around!—
as they scheme together against me,
as they plot to take my life.

¹⁴But I trust in you, O Lord;
I say, ‘You are my God.’

¹⁵My times are in your hand;
deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.

¹⁶Let your face shine upon your servant;
save me in your steadfast love.

This is a psalm about trusting God in all things especially in living, in trouble and death. For Christians the psalm has assumed a special place in devotion and the liturgy when in his final prayer Jesus used verse 5 and prayed, “Into your hand I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46). Psalm 31 has become a commentary on the passion of Jesus. The portion of the psalm we read today reflects two sides to this prayer for help.

The first five verses (9–13 NRSV, NIV) tell of the psalmist’s troubled, chaotic life. The language seems to suggest simultaneously, grief, sickness, depression and persecution, or at least alienation from his or her contemporaries. The image of the broken vessel (12 NRSV) is especially poignant. It seems that because of his trust in God the psalmist is experiencing the pain and alienation that is supposed to be reserved for the wicked. This passage is very close to Jeremiah’s suffering because of his prophetic ministry (Jeremiah 20). Like Jeremiah, Jesus’ faithfulness to the proclamation of the reign of the God culminated in the cross.

The psalmist, Jeremiah and Jesus, however, all turn over their case to God and trust becomes the dominant motif of their lives. Trust is quite realistic about pain and alienation but they do not overcome the trust. God’s steadfast love remains the bedrock for living (14–16 NRSV, NIV) as does God’s beautiful face alive with pleasure shining on those who trust YHWH despite the circumstances.

On this basis the psalm has been called a model of prayer that is confident of being heard. That confidence suffuses the psalm from start to finish. But, and it is a big but, the confidence that informs this prayer is NOT religious or spiritual virtue of the one who prays. It is a possibility based on the character of the one to whom the prayer is made. God is always true to himself (verse 5) and not subject to whimsical changes of

mind or direction. The Lord is rock, fortress, refuge because the Lord is always faithful to his promise to be faithful to those who trust him.

In this part of the psalm the greatest statement of that trust is, “My times are in your hand.” My whole life and destiny is firmly held in the hand of the unshakeable Lord. This sentence belongs to living and dying.

Questions: Do you trust God in adverse circumstances? What does confidence mean for you?

Meditate on the picture of God’s beautiful face alive with pleasure shining on the one who trusts.

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.

This famous passage has rightly shaped Christian theology, ethics and spirituality from the time it was written. Paul may be using a hymn here but that is not entirely clear. Nonetheless, it is an exceptionally powerful and poetic expression of the “mind of Christ” (2.4–5).

The background to this passage begins in 1.27–2.4. Paul writes from prison, possibly in Rome, a beautiful friendly letter to his much-loved friends in Philippi a Roman colony in Macedonia which he visited in about 50 CE about ten years before this letter and founded a lively church, the first in Europe.

He sees that the congregation is in double jeopardy from (1) posturing among themselves and (2) opposition from outside. In this passage the internal problem is the agenda. They can’t face the opposition from outside if they can’t live harmoniously with each other. That is his main point.

Because they are divided in this way they are intimidated by the opposition and ridicule from outside their ranks. The divisions are very human; ordinary people getting upset that others were getting more attention; others being overbearing with other members. Evil does not need anything big. The smallest slight will do; taking offence at the tiniest slight will do.

So, Paul encourages them to put the differences, slights, and personal difficulties in perspective and proportion. He wants them to share a unity of mind with each other,

not uniformity of mind but a unity of mind in the Spirit and in the gospel shaped by Christ's example.

The enemies of such a unity are selfish ambition and conceit; advancing ourselves out of our own pride and at the expense of others.

What Paul wants is humility; looking to the other, recognizing their claim on us; looking to the interests of the other. It is the active purposeful pursuit of the good and rights of each other.

Paul urges the Philippian church to share and express in their everyday living the mind of Christ, which Jesus demonstrated in his life and death and now works among them in the Spirit.

As God, he emptied himself (2.6–7). This is one of the earliest passages to speak of Jesus' pre-existence. There is an implied comparison with Adam who grasped or exploited his privileged position.

Jesus was in the form of God. This does not mean that he looked like God. It means he had all the characteristics of God. Paul concentrates on character not a theory of divinity. Jesus shares and expresses God's essential character. Paul is not saying that Jesus Messiah is like God but really not. He is the display of God's essential character.

And God's essential character was to ignore his own honour, pride, ambition, status and put our honour first; our interests first. To do that required that he take the form of a servant/slave.

Jesus does not seize the advantages of power and all that it brings. Jesus rejects the ordinary view of royal power which grasps power for one's personal advantage and status. He does not regard power and status as a treasure trove which he can plunder to his own advantage especially to the disadvantage of others.

Jesus takes the form of slave. In doing this he renders himself powerless, made himself as nothing. Paul talks of emptying and some have thought that this means that Jesus somehow did the impossible and dropped his real character. Paul is not talking in this passage about divinity but humility and he sticks to his point. A slave has no power, no status; a slave is invisible and utterly dispensable.

All that, Jesus has renounced in his becoming a slave, meaning a real human being subject to the hatred, violence, pride and selfish ambition of others. Jesus Messiah has an agreed task that comes from the heart of the character of God: to use servanthood for the setting of others free.

This man humbles himself, freely choosing the death on the cross. Recognisably a human being, Jesus obediently seeks the destruction of death for us. Of his freedom as God he chooses the path of destroying death and his method is a cross; a shameful

display of human violence and hatred, and a rejecting God's humility, God's love of their welfare, their interests.

Jesus' humiliation is one of a piece with his vindication. The resurrection is implied here and it leads to Jesus receiving the acknowledgement of his status as the one who rules beyond any Caesar. The universality of Jesus' vindication, its implications for the whole world, Paul clearly explains. This is no tribal God but the ruler of heaven and earth. But the same ruler joins distressed and alienated humans in the trenches and puts their needs before his rights.

God vindicates Jesus Messiah (9–11). God exalts Jesus Messiah. God exalts Jesus back into the highest possible fame and honour; that is back to where he was.

The name of Jesus is LORD. Caesar, celebrity, the wealthy whoever has a name has no name now except under the name of Jesus. Jesus determines what real status is; it the status of the servant. It is the status of one who does the will of another.

Homage and the witness of all peoples, all beings in the cosmos to the supremacy of the servant/slave Jesus Messiah is the final goal of the universe. Then God's glorious character will be really known; the character that has always looked to our interests at the expense of God's own honour. Then we will truly understand the cross and what it means.

Questions: How can we better live the life of the cross? How can we better join our mind to the mind of Christ? Do we despise humility? Do we desire humility above all else? Why? What might be some of the counterfeits of humility?

Matthew 27.11–54

Pilate Questions Jesus

¹¹Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus said, 'You say so.' ¹²But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. ¹³Then Pilate said to him, 'Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?' ¹⁴But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

Barabbas or Jesus?

¹⁵Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. ¹⁶At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. ¹⁷So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, 'Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?' ¹⁸For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. ¹⁹While he was sitting on the judgement seat, his wife sent word to him, 'Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.' ²⁰Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. ²¹The governor again said to them, 'Which of the two do you want me to release for you?' And they said, 'Barabbas.' ²²Pilate said to them, 'Then what should I do

with Jesus who is called the Messiah?’ All of them said, ‘Let him be crucified!’²³ Then he asked, ‘Why, what evil has he done?’ But they shouted all the more, ‘Let him be crucified!’

Pilate Hands Jesus over to Be Crucified

²⁴So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, ‘I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves.’²⁵ Then the people as a whole answered, ‘His blood be on us and on our children!’²⁶ So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

The Soldiers Mock Jesus

²⁷Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor’s headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him.²⁸ They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him,²⁹ and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’³⁰ They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head.³¹ After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

The Crucifixion of Jesus

³²As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross.³³ And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull),³⁴ they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it.³⁵ And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots;³⁶ then they sat down there and kept watch over him.³⁷ Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, ‘This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.’

³⁸Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left.³⁹ Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads⁴⁰ and saying, ‘You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.’⁴¹ In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying,⁴² ‘He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him.’⁴³ He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, “I am God’s Son.”⁴⁴ The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

The Death of Jesus

⁴⁵From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.⁴⁶ And about three o’clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ that is, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’⁴⁷ When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, ‘This man is calling for Elijah.’⁴⁸ At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink.⁴⁹ But the others said, ‘Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.’⁵⁰ Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.⁵¹ At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split.⁵² The tombs also were

opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. ⁵³After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. ⁵⁴Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

Note: The Gospel reading for today is Matthew 26–27 and far too long to comment on. So I have chosen a small section of the reading as example and even that is too long on which to offer an extended commentary.

We now come to the point in the Gospel narrative (also in Mark, Luke and John) when all the critical questions that the gospel story reveals in interactions with friend and foe, parables, miracles, exorcisms and teaching now come into sharp focus.

What is going on in regard to God and the world?

Is Jesus' work destroyed?

If Jesus' vocation has been to announce and display that God's kingdom has now come as it is in heaven what does this do to his hopes? Where does it fit?

This part of the story begins with the trial before Pilate who collaborates with the Jewish elders and is ultimately responsible for the crucifixion (11–26). The Jerusalem elite has handed Jesus over to the Roman governor. Only Rome can execute and this self-interested alliance will bias 'justice' towards the elite against the low status provincial. He has no chance.

The confrontation is one of two empires. In Matthew 2.6 Jesus is identified as a 'ruler' coming out of Bethlehem, exactly the same designation as that given to Pilate in this passage. They face each other as governors and rulers but of vastly different kingdoms. Jesus' silence here is not intimidated submission but the quiet confidence that God's liberation, promised in the Passover and the Last Supper, will now come to its mysterious conclusion. The kingdom will come.

The Barabbas passage displays Pilate testing out Jesus' popularity with the elites' rent-a-crowd. He has none. The only voice to speak up against it all is that of a woman, a Gentile and part of the elite. She is troubled by the revelation in her dreams that Jesus is righteous (not 'innocent'), that is, God is with him. The righteous will die and that is the key difference between the two empires. God reveals Godself in ways that the elites despise. Mrs Pilate is an important witness to the kingdom coming.

In this passage we must be extremely careful especially in the light of verse 25 which has been used throughout Christian history as an excuse for violent anti-Semitism on the basis of inherited Jewish guilt for deicide; a view rejected by most Christians today. A weak and unjust Rome is the real villain here. Already in the Lord Supper Jesus has spoken of his death as forgiveness. That is open to all.

The next section is the crucifixion of Jesus (27–44) in three scenes: The mockery of Jesus as King of the Jews (27–32), the crucifixion (33–37) and the derision of Jesus (38–44). This passage is full of irony centred on the notion of king. The clown king is saluted as king and yet he really is King. This king will exercise cosmic judgment and rule (25.31–46; 28.18–20). But what a different rule that will be.

The crucified revolutionary does bring change. The scriptures are fulfilled especially Psalms 22 and 69. The passers-by refer to the destruction of the Temple deeply ironic to Matthew's readers who have watched the Romans dismantle the Temple in 70CE.

Finally, Jesus dies, a story again told in three scenes (45–56); death on the cross (45–50), the portents (51–54) and the witness of the women (55–56). Once again, the scriptures form the framework. In the crucifixion Psalm 22 and 69 are the basis as is Amos 8.9. For the portents Zechariah 14.4–5 form the interpretative framework. One day, through Jesus' death, Israel will be restored. Jesus' death takes place in accord with the scriptures; a clear recognition of Jesus' death at the hands of the rebellious and violent would overcome rebellion and violence. Death would be overcome and Jesus' word vindicated according to the scriptures.

In the end the soldiers have the last word: "Truly this man was God's Son!" It is not the emperor who rules, nor the elites but God crucified.

The story of Jesus' death is told in stark simplicity. Everything is understated. There is no heavy overlay of theological reflection and abstraction. Instead, the reader is invited to make whatever he or she will of this event in the light of the whole story that began with a birth that promised peace but that sparked violence and now ends in violence. The King, however, will not take up the cudgels of violence. He will work to set his enemies, mockers and tormentors free from their lust for power and position (20.28). Matthew gives us no theory about how that might happen but invites us to find God present in this terrible event actively working to set human beings free just as the ancient scriptures promise. This is an earth-shaking event but only a few locally recruited soldiers intuitively grasp that great things are happening. And, of course, the women. They know.

In some modern understandings the crucifixion is interpreted as an angry father lashing out at an innocent and defenceless son. That interpretation has its basis in the real experience of the abuse of power in human life which is destructive and not redemptive. For his whole life Jesus' story is one of redefining power so that people are set free in love. That is the very nature of the Father which the Son shares and, in this story, displays its workings.

Two key elements weave their way in this story. The great powers that govern human life and keep humans chained and deceived, represented in Pilate and the elites with

their hidden spiritual masters (remember the temptation story in Matthew 4.1–11 where we started this journey?), have their power broken.

Forgiveness now flows, and fellowship and reconciliation replace estrangement. That is the key to the nature of forgiveness. This is a profound subject that has sometimes been trivialised into meaningless “it doesn’t matter”. I cannot explore this vital subject in the way I would wish but I will make a couple of comments and trust that they are helpful. (My thoughts come from many sources but the works of Vincent Brummer are important)

Estrangement can only be overcome by forgiveness. Loving fellowship is a relationship in which two persons identify with each other by each making the others’ real interests his or her own. I love you as myself. I love God with my whole person. When I stop such identifying with the other and serve my own interests I create estrangement. What will bring that relationship back together? The person I have broken with can condone my action, punish it or seek some satisfaction for it. Each has its place but none will restore fellowship.

What will restore loving fellowship is if the person wronged accepts the wrongdoing to him, absorb it in his own suffering the consequences of the wrong that caused it. The price of forgiveness is the suffering of the one sinned against.

That is God’s role here in these stories. God does not demand satisfaction or punishment. Forgiveness is totally a gift, but it refuses to condone the rebellion that created the break.

All I can do is repent. By repent I mean I renounce the ‘I’ who trashed fellowship with you by not identifying with your interests. My life is given over to identifying with you in seeking your interests as my own. My repentance cannot buy fellowship or satisfy injustice. I am dependent on the other’s freedom and favour for restoring and maintaining the fellowship between us.

In the Eucharist Jesus says, “...this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

Questions: Spend time this week taking any aspect of the story of Jesus’ death and let it speak to you? What changes to your life might you make? How much do you value God’s loving fellowship with you? How can we identify with God’s interests here and now?