

Holy Monday

Isaiah 42:1-9 - Obedience is the ideal quality of a servant. Isaiah sees the coming one as a servant: perfectly obedient, honored and upheld by Yahweh, specially chosen, filled with God's Spirit, and fully devoted to bringing justice to the Gentiles. The great deliverer would come in humility... gentle and tender, administering healing to those wounded by the harsh realities of life.

Hebrews 9:11-15 - The author of Hebrews stresses that Christ's priesthood is superior because it is administered from a better sanctuary. We're reminded in (vss 1-10) that under the Old Covenant, the sanctuary: 1) was on earth, 2) it was a "shadow of things to come," 3) it was inaccessible to the people, 4) it was temporary, and 5) it was ineffective for changing hearts. However, the New Covenant sanctuary inaugurated with Christ's priesthood is now a heavenly sanctuary, effective for changing lives.

John 12:1-11 - Ordinarily, anointing was something festive. But in this case the anointing was in anticipation of Jesus' burial. The ointment Mary used to anoint Jesus' feet was costly. She saved her best for Christ. When a follower of Jesus demonstrates such costly love, there is always a critic who will complain. Despite Judas' criticism, Jesus defends Mary's act of love and devotion..

The Grace of Suffering

A favorite story tells about a man walking down a street when he falls into a hole. The walls are so steep he can't get out. A doctor passes by and the guy shouts up, "Hey you! Can you help me out?" The doctor writes a prescription, throws it down into the hole, and moves on. Then a priest comes along and the man shouts up, "Father, I'm down in this hole; can you help me out?" The priest writes out a prayer, throws it down into the hole and moves on. Then a friend walks by. "Hey, Joe, it's me. Can you help me out?" And the friend jumps in the hole. The man says, "Are you crazy? Now we're both down here." The friend says, "Yes, but I've been down here before and I know the way out."

Only in jumping into the pit of our suffering could Jesus so intimately transform our lives. Rather than avoiding our pain, Christ moved toward it – stretching out His arms to embrace our hurt and frailty. In our suffering Savior we have assurance in the prophet's words, "a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench..."

Prayer – Almighty God, your Son suffered pain so I can know healing. As I walk in the path of the cross, help me discover it as the way to life and peace; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

**Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

Holy Tuesday

Isaiah 49:1-7 - From before birth, God had called his “chosen servant” for a specific ministry (Jeremiah. 1:5; Gal. 1:15). God prepared him like “a sharp sword and a polished arrow.” A humble servant is an amazing weapon in the hand of God. God’s Servant explains His ministry as bringing light in darkness and liberty to the captives.

1 Corinthians 1:18-31 - Mixing the Gospel message with the wisdom of the world had created confusion and division among the Corinthian believers. Paul makes clear: To add anything to Christ or His cross is to diminish Him and His work and rob them of their power.

John 12:20-36 - John has directed our attention to the fact that at the birth of Jesus, Gentiles had come from the east. He points out that Gentiles come once again at his death. The Jews wanted to “see a sign.” The Gentiles wanted to “see Jesus.” Though his hour is at hand (his death is near), Jesus sees it as the hour of his glory. He invites “anyone” (v. 26), reminding us that the ground is level at the foot of the cross. Neither Jew nor Gentile has any special advantage.

Troubled Times

Do you feel that you’re the only one? Do you try and hide the fact that there are times when you’re weary... discouraged... troubled? Take heart – you’re in good company! In today’s readings, Isaiah laments, “I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity...” Even Jesus acknowledges the heaviness of certain spiritual seasons, saying, “Now my soul is troubled.”

Holy Week offers us an example of how to respond to seasons of adversity and suffering. In the midst of his lament, the prophet is quick to say, “...yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God.” Jesus mirrors this pattern stating, “And what should I say – ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.”

Times of trouble and sorrow offer an opportunity for God’s strength to be revealed in our weakness. In the times we are most vulnerable, God is fully revealed. When our wisdom ends, His begins. What appears to be a cross of shame is revealed as an instrument of salvation. A tomb becomes a source of transformation. Know that in times of trouble, God is especially near, offering peace and wisdom.

Prayer – Holy God, the passion of your Son reveals a cross as the instrument of my redemption and a grave as a gateway to eternal life. Give me grace to see adversity as an opportunity for your power to be fully revealed; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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Holy Wednesday

Isaiah 50:4-9a - In contrast to Israel's wayward practice, the Lord Jesus is portrayed as the complete obedient Servant; one who listens to learn, speaks because he has been taught, and resists rebelliousness. This remarkable obedience and humility is presented to God in confidence resulting in a courageous spirit that would sustain Jesus in his sufferings.

Hebrews 12:1-3 - The stories of those who have endured hardships (as recalled in chapter 11 of Hebrews) is always an encouragement for us. They become witnesses, who, like spectators in a vast arena, watch us progress in the course of the faith.

We are admonished to run with patient endurance in light of these examples. Yet, the premier example is Jesus... who endured the cross, shame, and hostility. He never lost sight of the joy that was beyond the cross.

John 13:21-32 - Jesus does not identify the betrayer by name. He indicated that he was the one to whom He would hand the bread to, after it had been dipped in the dish. Accepting the soggy bread, without accepting the pleading love that went with it, revealed that Judas was stealing his heart to do what he had contracted to do... betray the Lord.

What Do You See?

The Gospel reading – and all of Holy Week – presents a powerful lesson in perspective. Jesus is troubled – not only at His impending death, but by Judas' rejection of his love and by his disciple's betrayal. As Judas leaves the Lord's Table, Jesus knows he is about to be tortured... abandoned... killed. Yet he looks beyond the cross and the grave and sees the ultimate purpose of God. It is this perspective that enables him to speak of God being glorified even in the midst of the gathering darkness.

On the other end of the spectrum is Judas. He has lost the perspective of seeing God glorified. His vision is shortened, focusing only on the immediate felt need of the moment. He leaves the light and fellowship of Jesus' presence and enters into the darkness of night. It is this loss of perspective that ultimately leads to his destruction.

What do you see? In your own life, what offers the perspective of God's purpose? When shadows gather and suffering is at hand, remember the nurturing fellowship found at the Lord's Table.

Prayer – Merciful God, in seasons of suffering give me the perspective of eternity and the joy of your sustaining presence; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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Maundy Thursday

Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14 - The eating of the lamb on the night of Israel's redemption was to follow a detailed pattern, and was to be accompanied with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs. The sacrificial lamb must be "perfect" as a first-year animal. The slaying was carefully prescribed and timed. The blood was the most significant and symbolic item. It must be carefully caught and applied to the doorposts and lintel. This was the central feature and meaning of the sacred observance. This dramatically captured and symbolized God's provision and protection.

It was to be eaten by people who were ready to leave at a moment's notice, and anything left over in the morning had to be burned (12:10, 11).

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 - Paul reminds the Corinthians (and us) of the importance of the Lord's Supper (Holy Communion, or the Eucharist). The actions of the communicants were, to take the bread and eat, to take the cup and drink, and to do both in remembrance of Christ. But the outward acts are not the whole, or the principal part, of what is to be done at this holy ordinance. Those who partake of it, are to take him as their Lord and Life, yield themselves up to him, and live upon him.

The Lord's Supper is not an ordinance to be observed merely for a time, but to be continued.

John 13:1-17, 31b-35 - The call to love is not new. It is embedded in the Old and New Testaments. Yet the command here is "new" in three ways. (1) There is a new focus. We are still to love our neighbor, but now a more intense love is to be directed toward "one another." (2) There is a new standard. We are no longer to love others "as you love yourself," but "as I [Jesus] have loved you." Christ's own committed, self-sacrificial and limitless love is the yardstick by which we are to measure our love for our Christian brothers and sisters. And (3) there is a new outcome. As the Christian community is infused by Christ-like love, the world of lost humankind realizes that Jesus is real—and that we are His.

Sacramental Love

You can tell a lot about a person by their last words and deeds. It is these last, fleeting moments with loved ones that reveal the essence of who they are and what is important. The same is true with Jesus.

In His last moments with His disciples, the depth of His love is expressed in tangible moments they will remember – and replicate. He cleanses them. He feeds them. He speaks words of loving instruction to them.

He does the same with us today. In the sacrament of Holy Communion we are cleansed... nourished... lovingly instructed. And, like the disciples, we are called to replicate what we have experienced, loving others as Christ loves us.

Prayer – Merciful God as I receive with thankful heart the mysteries of Your Body and Blood, help me to reflect Your loving life to others; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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Good Friday

Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 - The fourth and greatest of the Servant poems focuses on the suffering and triumphant Servant, through whom Zion's salvation would become possible. The first and fifth paragraphs are in the future (imperfect) tense. Paragraphs two through four are in the prophetic perfect of assured prediction.

For a Christian, reading through these verses is a pilgrimage down the Via Dolorosa. That this Servant is Jesus of Nazareth is settled for the believer by New Testament authority (see Acts 8:26-35; Matthew 12:18).

Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9 - The writer of Hebrews emphasizes the superiority of Christ's priesthood. He writes at length concerning our High Priest (4:14-10:18). Because Christ endured all the temptations we have endured, we can depend on him to supply all the grace we need (see 2:17-18).

A Jewish high priest had to be chosen by God and had to be compassionate (5:1-4). Jesus fulfilled both of these requirements. 1) God selected him to be an eternal priest like Melchizedek (5:5-6, 10; Ps. 110:4). 2) While on earth, Jesus demonstrated great compassion (see Matt. 9:36; 14:14; 15:32). He learned much about our suffering through his own suffering (5:7-10).

John 18:1-19:42 - John, like the other Gospel writers, covers the events leading up to Jesus' crucifixion thoroughly and also adds fresh details. He reports the jolt that went through the mob come to arrest Jesus when He tells them "I Am" and identifies Peter as the disciple who drew a sword to defend Him (18:1-11). John reports Jesus' examination before both Annas (vv. 12-14) and the high priest (vv. 19-24) and gives colorful specifics about Peter's denial of the Lord (vv. 15-18, 25-27).

John's most significant contribution, however, is his detailed description of the trial before Pilate and the frustrated attempts of that weak governor to release a person he knew very well was innocent (18:28-19:16).

John also adds a graphic account of Christ on the cross and His undying concern for Mary (vv. 17-27). John just as vividly describes Jesus' death (vv. 28-37) and then, in Joseph of Arimathea's borrowed tomb, His burial (vv. 38-42). Decades had passed before John wrote down his account, but these events clearly were indelibly impressed on his memory. It was a night and day no one since has been able to forget. ⁱ

Were You There?

If only I was there... As we read the account of Jesus' suffering and death, we catch ourselves thinking these words, thinking we would have stopped it. The truth is – we were there.

From the cross, Christ looked down and saw your face and mine. Across time and eternity, He saw our sin... brokenness... need. For us, He suffered death and was buried. *Sometimes, it causes me to tremble... tremble... tremble. Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*

Prayer *Almighty God, look upon me and Your family with grace as we remember the suffering and death of Your perfect Son, Jesus Christ; Amen.*

ⁱ Lawrence O. Richards. The Bible Readers Companion. electronic ed. (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1991). 695.