

The Cross: Week 2

Steve Watson | Daily Bible Guide | 2020

Monday, March 2

Luke 23:35-43 (NRSV)

³⁵ And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" ³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, ³⁷ and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ³⁸ There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹ And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³ He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Points of Interest

- We pick up where we left off last Monday in Luke, just after Jesus has asked God to forgive the crowds and the executioners. It's a harsh scene. Jealous, bitter rivals insult him. Soldiers taunt him. Even the man dying by Jesus' side hurls insults. It's a surprising context for a tender moment between two men, but that's what happens.
- I empathize with both criminals. Both are under torture, hanging naked and bloody, struggling to even breathe, as death approaches. One turns to the quiet, seemingly resigned man named Jesus and is overcome with rage and bitterness, born of desperate fear. The other humbly sees his own part in his fate and seeks mercy, however Jesus and his God can give it. Maybe there are parts of all of us in both these criminals - parts of us that are aggrieved and resentful, parts of us that know our wounds and long for help.
- At stake in this scene is also what it means to be God's Messiah (in Hebrew, "the anointed one") or to be a king who has authority over some kind of kingdom. Perhaps this is why Jesus' second word ("Today you will be with me in paradise.") has traditionally been called The Word of Salvation. Will Jesus save or rule by overpowering the Roman kingdom and its brutal criminal justice system? He either can't or won't. But can Jesus remember us and show us mercy, in this life and the next? Can Jesus guide us to love, joy,

and peace, to a reality that is just and whole and good? Jesus says he can, and it is so good, he calls it Paradise.

- This scene evokes one of the oldest Christian formulas of salvation. Why did Jesus live and why did Jesus die? The early church would say: God became like us so that we could become like God. We'll explore that mystery all week, but the beginnings are here. Innocent Jesus becomes the executed criminal, while the dying criminal gains access to Paradise.

A Direction for Prayer

Think of any of your friends and family who are in some form suffering right now. Pray that their mind and heart would be open to the kindness and mercy of God, and that God would find a way to them.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Holy Exchange – This week, we explore the ancient promise of salvation: God became like us so that we could become like God. Write down one aspect of yourself, your experience, your life, or our world that is most marked by sin or death - something we are entangled in that is far from God. Hold the word or phrase in your hand and offer it to Jesus, praying the ancient prayer, “Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on us.” Ask Jesus what aspect of the life of God Jesus would like to grow in you and your world in place of what you are offering to Jesus.

Tuesday, March 3

Isaiah 53:1-12 (NRSV)

Who has believed what we have heard?
And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
² For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
³ He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account.
⁴ Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
⁵ But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.
⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.
⁷ He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
⁸ By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.
⁹ They made his grave with the wicked
and his tomb with the rich,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.
¹⁰ Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.
When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;
through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.
¹¹ Out of his anguish he shall see light;
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
¹² Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;
because he poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.

Points of Interest

- This passage is one of four poems in the second section of the Hebrew prophecies of the book of Isaiah. The poems are called the Servant Songs. Jews have traditionally read them as odes to the redemptive suffering and vindication of the nation of Israel or any number of historic figures. In addition to this reading, followers of Jesus have read these poems as anticipations of the meaning of the life and death of Jesus. With just one day to spend on this part of just one of the songs, we'll read them in this latter spirit.
- Isaiah warns that these events will be hard to believe. They are shocking, they are mysterious, and they are the ways of God with people. This is a story we never would have written.
- We don't want to take any single image in this poem too literally. It's poetry: God has an arm. And God's servant is a tiny shoot of a plant and a sacrificial lamb and a disfigured outcast and a nameless pauper thrown into an anonymous grave. And yet this servant is also a Champion, whose righteousness and justice and vindication have significance to many beyond himself.
- There are so many words in this poem for what is broken in the human condition - disease, transgression, waywardness, and many more. I don't resist any of them but these days, I find the medical or therapeutic language most compelling and evocative. It reminds me of a line in Richard Beck's book, *Trains, Jesus, and Murder: The Gospel According to Johnny Cash*. "The church fathers (and mothers) describe sin as a wound. And for the most part, it's a self-inflicted wound." (153) On these terms, Jesus has suffered and suffers with us in every aspect of our woundedness and in joining us there, is returning to us all the healing and wholeness of the life of God.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray that your church will reflect the nature of Jesus, our Wounded healer: humble, gentle, unafraid to touch pain and injustice, hopefully undespairs, in the faith that life wins and love wins.

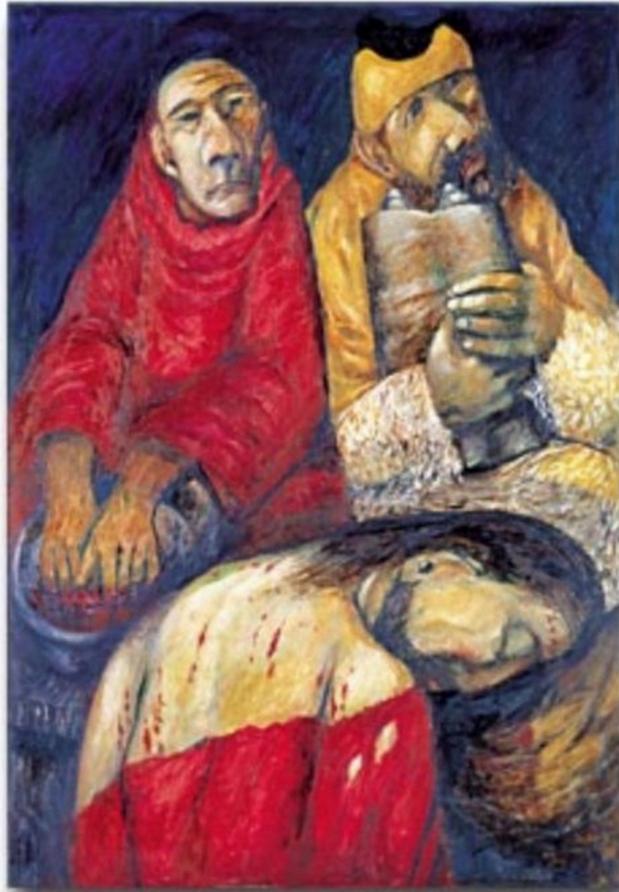
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Wednesday, March 4

Today we offer to you a short poem to supplement our Bible readings. It is in the form of a collect - a short prayer in which we collect words of praise and request and offer them to God. The poem, by Padraig O'Tuama, and the artwork by Sieger Koder can be found here:

<http://www.padraigotuama.com/news/stationsofthecross> and in Padraig's short book [Daily Prayer with the Corrymeala Community](#).



God of the accused
and the accusing,
who made the mouth, the ear and
the heart of all in conflict.
May we turn ourselves towards that
which must be heard,

because there we will hear your voice.

Amen.

Points of Interest

- This painting and poem focus on the wounded side of the Suffering Servant, before his vindication. It evokes for us the mocking, the insults, the suffering that was Jesus' - and sometimes ours - to bear, not the Paradise that would grow out of that dirt.
- The painting depicts three figures - two accusers and one accused. The accusers self-righteously clutch their scrolls or stare vacantly forward while trying to wash the blood off their hands. In today's world, you could read these figures as government and religion - each complicit in the accusation and suffering of many. The accused simply bows his head, still burdened by the weight of his suffering. The poem tells us that God made the bodies and minds of them all - it all must be seen and heard.
- The cross is an inescapably religious image, but by casting Christ as the victim of accusation, or the vulnerable party in conflict, Jesus is no longer the most religious figure in this image or poem. Jesus here is most identified with a victim of accusation and with the losing party in any conflict.
- Will we most hear the voice of God from the lips of the accused and the convicted? Will we most see the face of God in the faces of the oppressed and the afflicted? This too is part of the story of the cross.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for friends and family members who have been accused or hurt in conflict, that they will know the healing presence of Jesus with them. Pray for friends and family members who have accused or done harm to others in conflict, that they will have the courage to see and hear what they have done, and to begin to make amends.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

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Thursday, March 5

II Corinthians 5:14-21

¹⁴ For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. ¹⁵ And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

¹⁶ From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷ So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰ So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Points of Interest

- Many of the letters of the New Testament - especially the five we know were written by a man named Paul of Tarsus - are full of these long, enormously complex sentences whose meaning is not always crystal clear to us. Here is no exception. But beneath the complexity, there is some delicious paradox in this passage, between the universal and the particular.
- There is a universality. Two times, we read that Jesus died for *all*. We read that in some mystical sense, *all* people have died with Christ. In Christ, God was reconciling *the world* to God. All people are in some form of union with Jesus Christ - a far-from-God way of life dying with Jesus, a reconciled life with God rising with Jesus.
- There is also a particularity. The passage says that if anyone is *in Christ*, there is a new creation. Is that all people or not? People are entreated to be reconciled to God, as if not all people are already. Followers of Jesus are enlisted as ambassadors, to represent the good news to others.
- So how are people reconciled to God? And are all people, or only some subset - like those who believe certain things and pray certain prayers? Or those who are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ? Or those who have faith in God, trusting in God's mercy however it is they know or understand God? Obviously, there are centuries of debate on this topic. Making pronouncements on it is out of my league, but I'm inclined to take the "all" seriously. I'm inclined to hope in the God that loves all God made and has truly

reconciled all things and all people to God in Christ, even if only some of us are living in the full realization and benefit of that relationship.

- The final verse of today's passage is one of the places that states a version of the ancient creed we're exploring this week. The perfect, sinless Jesus Christ has become us in all our mortality and waywardness and woundedness, so that we could become the perfected versions of ourselves. The life and love of God has become one with the death and cruelty of humanity, so that we could know love and life in this life and through all eternity.
- A challenging and beautiful implication of this view of salvation is buried in today's passage. "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view." Looks, status, abilities, social skills, all the ways we validate and invalidate ourselves and one another, all the ways we include and exclude, the filters through which we rank and sort and judge -- they're all lying to us. Christ died for all. God is reconciling all things in Christ, bringing us all into God's loving relationship. And if anyone is in Christ, everything is new! What might it mean to see ourselves and all people through this lens of renewal? To look for signs and possibilities of new life? Of belovedness? Of worth?

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for your city, that more and more people will discover their own and all their fellow humans' belovedness and renewal, that more and more people wouldn't only live for themselves but also for God and for the renewing of all creation.

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Friday, March 6

Luke 19:1-10

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. ² A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³ He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵ When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." ⁶ So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷ All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." ⁸ Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." ⁹ Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Points of Interest

- There's just so much to love in this story. It's a rags to riches to rags story, for one. And it's something of an Ebenezer Scrooge tale too. Zaccheus was always picked on because he was so short, so he collaborates with the Roman colonizers to enrich himself at his own people's expense. But now, the corrupt tax collector turns good! One more thing I love. So often, we think of virtue as steady and quiet goodness and sin as impulsive yielding to temptation. But with Zaccheus, his steady and quiet work did harm to his people and his soul, and his virtue returned through an impulsive vow of goodness.
- In Zaccheus' life, I also see this week's theme played out: God becoming like us in Jesus, so that we can become like him.
- Jesus first joins Zaccheus in his life. Jesus calls Zaccheus down to him. He invites himself into Zaccheus' home, exposing himself to the same grumbling and gossip that Zaccheus experienced.
- Then Zaccheus becomes like Jesus. There's something in Zaccheus that warms to Jesus' friendship. He makes amends for the economic harm he's done. Like Jesus, he becomes a person of generosity and justice. Where he had made himself an outsider to his own people, he joins Jesus on the inside again. Jesus calls this transformation salvation. Zaccheus had been another lost son, like the one in the story in Luke 15 that we read about last week, but now he too is back home.
- This story gets me thinking about ways I've slowly become a person I'm not meant to be - ways I'm greedier or stingier or more fearful or meaner or whatever than I was meant to be. It makes me think about how Jesus is happy to be with me in my home just as I am, and happy when that stirs up renewal in me and helps me find my way again.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for the the people in your city and country that rip people off and do harm to others, that God would gently expose the pain and hurt and the roots of the bad people they've become. Pray that love would find its way into their hearts and home and change them into the generous and just people they were made to be.

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