



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Monday in Holy Week
April 6, 2020

[RCL] Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 36:5-11; Hebrews 9:11-15; John 12:1-11

Isaiah 42:1-9

Isaiah 42:1-4 is known as one of the Songs of the Suffering Servant, based on a figure who appears again in Isaiah in chapters 49, 50, 52 and 53. In the Christian tradition, interpreters have read this passage as predicting Jesus, but this kind of reading can be harmful, as it often erases Jewish interpretation of a Jewish text. The figure of the suffering servant has been interpreted in Jewish tradition as a king or a prophet, but most often as the nation of Israel as a whole. Israel will suffer because its people work for God's justice and righteousness, but they will ultimately be rewarded and redeemed by God for this work. In this passage, after a description of the leadership of the suffering servant, God reinforces the covenant with Israel, describing taking the nation by the hand and giving Israel as a "light to the nations" who will do God's work of setting free those who are imprisoned and oppressed. God loves Israel and has chosen them for this purpose.

- Jesus was Jewish, and as a member of God's beloved nation of Israel, he was called to the work of servant leadership for justice and righteousness. Jesus calls his followers to this same work. When and how have you felt called to work for justice on behalf of others? What was that experience like for you? How was it difficult? How was it rewarding?

Psalm 36:5-11

While in our Gospel reading, Mary shows extravagant love for Jesus, here our psalmist rejoices in God's extravagant love for us. God's hospitality and love are not reserved for people in a particular group or community or religion. The "abundance" of God's "house," God's steadfast love and the refuge of God's wings are for all people. Our psalmist further reminds us that our Creator's boundless love and care extend not just to humans, but to all of creation: "You save both man and beast, O Lord."

- How have you witnessed or felt God's love in your life or in the lives of others?
- When was a time it was difficult to feel God's love? What are the implications of God's love being not only for humans but for all living creatures?

Hebrews 9:11-15

The author of the letter to the Hebrews presents Christ as a royal high priest, who instead of sacrificing offerings of grain or animals as earthly priests did in the temple, sacrifices himself on behalf of humanity. Christ's loving self-sacrifice on the cross and God's final word of love in the resurrection have been interpreted

by some theologians as God's "no" to violent sacrifice. During Jesus' life, his words and actions amplify the message that God delivers throughout the Bible's prophetic literature: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6; Matt. 9:13). In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus opens God's covenant of mercy and love to all. Another way theologians have approached atonement is as "at-one-ment": Jesus's self-giving life and ministry, his death, and his resurrection all serve to destroy sin and death and unify us with God and with God's love for us. Through this unification, to return to the words of the author of Hebrews, we are moved to respond and "worship the living God," who offers us this "promised eternal inheritance" of love.

- What would it mean to you to think of Jesus's death and resurrection as God's "no" to all violent sacrifice? As God's "at-one-ment" with us?
- The author of Hebrews writes that worship of God is one appropriate response to Jesus's self-sacrifice. How might you respond to Jesus's self-giving love in your own life?

John 12:1-11

John's Gospel tells us that before he rides into Jerusalem on the path that will lead to the cross, Jesus returns to the house of his friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Jesus loves his three friends (John 11:5), and it is clear that they love him in return, as they offer the hospitality of their home and table. Mary's anointing of Jesus's feet is an extravagant gesture of this love. Offering hospitality was an important practice of Jesus's time period, and part of good hospitality was washing the feet of one's guests.

Mary goes above and beyond, anointing Jesus's feet with richly fragrant oil, and drying his feet, not with a towel, but with her own hair. Is this love out of gratitude for Jesus's own extravagant act of love in bringing Lazarus back from the dead? Is this love not only of friendship but of worship because Mary, like her sister Martha (John 11:27), knows her friend to be the Son of God? Is this love out of sorrow and grief for Jesus's impending death? Oil was (and still is) used not only for burial but also for healing. Does Mary lovingly anoint Jesus not only as preparation for his death but also as a way to give healing to him in his time of suffering? Perhaps Mary acts out of all of these places of love, a love beyond what can be said—a love expressed not with words but with her hands, her hair, her whole body, and the strong, memory-making scent of fragrant oil.

- Imagine yourself in the scene of Mary anointing Jesus's feet. Read the passage slowly several times. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you smell? What emotions do you feel?
- Mary shows her love for Jesus without words. What are some ways we might show our love for Jesus today, with or without words?

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