



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Lent 5 (C)
April 3, 2022

RCL: Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

Isaiah 43:16-21

Have you had the opportunity to visit an arid landscape? There is a rich and complex ecosystem here, but to someone who is unfamiliar with the terrain, it might be hard to see the complexity of the webs of life. When the rain comes, the whole ecosystem springs forth into wild and exuberant life, the survival of the ecosystem depends on efficient use of each drop of water. The Midwest of my youth was full of lush gardens and distinct life, highly visible in the later spring, summer, and fall. However, if someone unfamiliar with the climate of Michigan were to visit in snowy February, they might think it impossible for lush gardens to grow. It's important for us to remember that we might not understand the ecosystem, but there is a Master Gardener at hand. We might not understand the place and the complexity, but God shows forth God's glory and makes a path for restorative and abundant life, even if it is not yet apparent to our untrained eyes.

- Reflect on seasons of stillness or seeming drought in your life. How was God with you, and what profound life was there around you?
- God is doing a new thing, an impossible thing this Lent. How can we train our hearts to see it? Discuss this with a friend. Share and listen to holy life with those around you.

Psalm 126

This psalm is a song of ascent, sung as a prayer for pilgrims journeying up toward the Temple, and speaks of the heart cry of restoration of Zion and of all of God's people. This psalm is a rallying cry for hope, reminding us on our Lenten journey that Christ has already conquered sin, death, and separation, and already restored us to new life with God. We pilgrims of the Way can sing this psalm in our hearts as we both remember and anticipate joy, especially amid our temporal and very real sorrows and struggles. Our current experience, the news we read and pray for locally and around the world, is bracketed by God's restoration and promise of real joy. Joy behind us, and joy before us.

- Pray for us to be open to God's mission of restoration to all creation. How can we live and serve with our daily experiences bracketed in hope? What would this look like, sound like, and feel like?
- How can we hold joy and sorrow at the same time? Reflect and write on times God has whispered of hope and restoration to you.

Philippians 3:4b-14

This Lent, we reflect on our deep need (and gratitude) for the repentance and restoration we have with God through the life, teaching, and generosity of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Paul reminds us that our righteousness is not earned by our personal piety, choices, or moral aptitude or merit; salvation, forgiveness, and restoration are entirely due to the expansive and abundant grace of God. We do this, too, don't we? Are we virtue-signaling through our social media usage or in donations publicly proclaimed to organizations doing God's work of restoration and healing with societal injustice and environmental wrongdoing? Do we look askance at parents who send their children to private schools rather than being invested in their local public school, or at families who choose not to invest in formal Christian private education for their kids? How often do we use the shorthand of the world and assess ourselves and others based on educational degrees, lineage, professions, and who is in (or out) of social circles? All the world can offer and its values do not compare to the wholeness, completion, fulfillment, and beauty and eternal communion through Christ. Let us spur each other up and on to the prize of the heavenly call of God.

- Does our piety get in the way of following God with a humble heart? In what ways could God be gently and lovingly encouraging us to repent and be restored?
- What would the rest of this day and week look like if we set our eyes on the prize of the heavenly call of God? Would it look or feel differently than it does now?

John 12:1-8

Imagine the bittersweetness of this party for Jesus. He's spending one of his last days in his last week before his death with his dear friends Lazarus, Martha, and Mary, and the rest of Jesus' nearest and dearest. Perhaps Mary was aware of Jesus' emotional experience and knew on some level what her dear friend and Savior was contemplating. She fully knew Jesus' love and power; after all, he raised her beloved brother from the dead. Mary gave a gift of prophecy and of deep love and devotion, this perfume was medicinal and used cosmetically and for burial. Perhaps Mary knew on some level that Jesus could not be contained by death, and is endlessly worthy of honor, love, and the sacrifice of humility, drying his feet with her hair as she prepares him for burial with the gift of beauty, whose scent fills the entire house. This gift was evocative and promoted strong responses from the disciples and from Jesus, who understood this gift. This was an act of mercy, beauty, and justice entwined.

- There is a midrash likening the fragrance of perfume filling the house just as a good name spreads across communities. Perhaps Mary prophetically anticipated the ministry and spread of the Gospel. How can we "perfume the world" with the Good News of Jesus today and this week?

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