

bible⁺study: april 2020

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Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

April 5, 2020 Text: Mark 15:22-39 “Jesus Dies on a Cross”

This Sunday is Palm/Passion Sunday. Do you remember when it was simply “Palm Sunday”? The day was filled with “Hosannas” and children waving palm branches. It was a very upbeat kind of day.

When many churches began to omit Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services, what we experienced was going straight from the happy waving of palm branches to the excitement and thrill of Easter morning. The central fact of Jesus’ death on a cross disappeared.

So, in an effort to make sure that we tell the whole story, those who plan worship resources and schedules have made this Sunday do double duty: palms indeed, but also the terrifying crucifixion: Palm/Passion Sunday.

Our study text zeroes in on the moment of Jesus’ death (Mark 15:37). The gospel writer says that when Jesus died, the curtain of the temple sanctuary was torn in two. From top to bottom (Mark 15:38). From top to bottom! This could not have been human doing; it was God who tore the curtain. And why? That curtain is what separated the holy of holies from the rest of the temple; ordinary people could not go behind the curtain, but with the death of Jesus it is now open to everyone! God’s love in Jesus is inclusive!

Hebrews 10:19 puts it this way: “Brothers and sisters, we have confidence that we can enter the holy of holies by means of Jesus’ blood, through a new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, which is his body...”

In the old days of the temple, the high priest represented the people when he went behind the curtain into the holy of holies. Now, with the death of Jesus, the invitation is to all. Are there those who have not heard the invitation? Are there those who feel left outside? This scene at the death of Jesus swings wide the gate! Y’all come!

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture* (Kingswood), Russell Richey states: “Methodism’s new role for women, the invitation to the outsider, the freedom in preaching to all varieties of people, its daring in crossing linguistic and racial boundaries, and its willingness to embrace the stranger, once redeemed, into new fellowship offered a radically new form of community to Americans. “

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “We sing, O Lord, ‘Come, sinners, to the gospel feast; let every soul be Jesus’ guest.’ Move now among us to tear down the curtains that divide...”

April 12, 2020 Text: Matthew 28:1-10 “Jesus’ Resurrection”

Do you and your family have some traditions for celebrating Easter? One I remember was an Easter when I was a little boy. It rained so hard that our usual Easter egg hunt could not be held out-of-doors. My mother hid those brightly colored boiled eggs all over the house. I found one in the cabinet under the kitchen sink. There was another one waiting for me on top of the refrigerator. Yes, I found the one under the paper napkins. Mother asked, “How many do you have?” I had seven. “There are eight of them,” she noted. I looked and I looked and I looked, but no more eggs were to be found.

A few weeks later, my sister wondered, “What is that smell?” None of us could figure it out. Following our noses, we made our way to a decorative glass bowl on a shelf in the corner of the dining room. Ah, yes. There was the missing egg. Easter unclaimed can go bad.

What would have happened if the two Marys had not gone to the tomb on the first day of the week (Matthew 28:1)? What if no one believed the angel (Matthew 28:2)? What if the two women had thought that women had no business proclaiming to men (Matthew 28:7)? What would have happened if Mary and Mary had kept the news about Jesus to themselves (Matthew 28:10)? What would have happened if the two did not believe they were really seeing the real Jesus (Matthew 28:9)? Easter unclaimed can go bad.

The joy that comes with Easter is because believers have claimed the

resurrection as true, as life-changing, and as available to all. Jesus’ powerful invitation [“They will see me there” (Matthew 28:10)] still moves across the centuries to us. The risen Christ is among us!

What will happen if we do not go to the newly emptied tomb? What will happen if we do not tell others? What will happen if we try to limit whom God can call and employ? What will happen if we fail to see the Lord who comes into our midst as the hungry, the thirsty, the imprisoned, the unclothed, the stranger (Matthew 25:34-46)? Easter unclaimed can go bad.

Those who follow the Daily Bible Readings in the Cokesbury series know that today’s daily text is Revelation 1:13-18. It announces that Jesus has the keys to death and the grave. That’s Easter claimed!

What Someone Else Has Said:

Carl Michalson (*The Hinge of History*, Scribners) wrote: “... (People) could be led to accept the resurrection as a fact of the past and thereby miss the resurrection as a future, an imminent presence which supports their life in the present.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Alleluia! You are risen, O Lord!...”

April 19, 2020 Text: Haggai 2:1-9 “Rebuilding the Temple”

Do you remember (go back to the study for March 29) that the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed? As the exile to Babylon was ending, things began to stir again in Jerusalem, including an effort to rebuild the temple. The brief writings of the prophet Haggai were written for that time.

The verses that are the focus of this study text are Haggai’s encouragement to those who face the task of putting together another temple that would be central for the worship of God. “This house will be more glorious than its predecessor” (Haggai 2:9) is a pretty strong promise!

The prophet is clear that he is not speaking for himself. He speaks for God (Haggai 2:1, 4a, 4b, 4c, 6, 7, 8, 9). He even puts the text into the first person. The “I” in these verses is God. Haggai is not making personal promises; he is merely passing on the promises of God. That helps us understand that “prophet” is not necessarily someone who predicts; a prophet is one who speaks for another.

Although some of us have experienced rebuilding after a loss (Remember Hurricane Florence?), the reconstruction of the temple was more than getting a building back where there had been one. It is a sign that the God who gave Israel a new beginning by leading them out of Egypt’s slavery (Haggai 2:5) is the same God who will give a new beginning to those returning from Babylonian exile.

Where does your life need a new beginning? Hear these words in Haggai as encouragement that God joins you in that new beginning. What good thing in your life seems to have fallen apart? Hear these words of encouragement that God is not through with you yet.

Isn’t it interesting that we know almost nothing about this prophet who brought such a strong word of hope and possibility? Most of us fall into the category of “folks in other places don’t know that much about me.”

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Yet God has used such an unknown voice to speak to God’s people. God can use folks like us, too!

Maybe I ought to go back and read all of this book of Haggai!

What Someone Else Has Said:

Hans Walter Wolff (*Haggai*, Augsburg) says: “Haggai is impelled by a

single question: how can the devastated temple in Jerusalem be rebuilt? His success reflects an unusual capacity for motivating other people through his own energy.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Your love encourages me, O Lord...”

April 26, 2020 Text: Mark 1:1-8 “John Prepares the Way for Christ”

Is Mark confused? He starts his gospel account by saying it is “the beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ” (Mark 1:1). But the very next thing Mark tells about is something written hundreds of years earlier: a quotation from Isaiah 40:3. Then, he explores the work of John the Baptizer (Mark 1:4-8). He does not even include a reference to the birth of Jesus. As Mark tells the story, there was a whole lot of getting ready for Jesus.

But, make no mistake. The gospel writer understands that all of this “beginning of the good news” is penultimate. The ultimate of the good news is Jesus Christ himself. All of this other was preparing the way.

Do we still need to prepare the way for Christ?

When we live life in such a way that people ask “Why do you do that?” and our answer is “because of Jesus Christ,” we have prepared the way.

When we offer a community with “open hearts, open minds, open doors,” we have invited others and we have prepared the way.

When we continue to dig in the Holy Scriptures, knowing that the Word will be revealed, we have prepared the way.

When we extend the invitation to the Lord’s Table with an invitation to confession, we have prepared the way.

When we work for justice and when we seek to live out love of neighbor, we have prepared the way.

The driveway to the United Methodist Church of the Dunes in Grand Haven, Michigan, is quite steep and dangerous in bad weather. Just before one exits down that major descent, there is a sign: “You are departing to serve. Warning: The road may be slippery.” Yes! That is true! We are called to be preparing for the One who has come, but the road may be slippery!

What Someone Else Has Said:

T. W. Manson (*The Servant-Messiah*, Cambridge at the University Press) has written: “This ministry (of John the Baptizer) has two distinctive features: it is a clear call to moral renewal and it has a clear reference to the Jewish Messianic hope.”

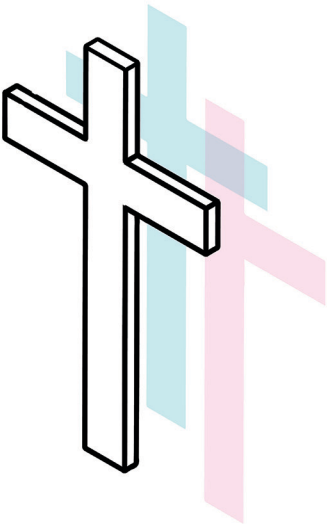
Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Let my life point to You, O Lord...”

The very first Easter taught us this: that life never ends and love never dies. - *Kate McGahan*

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