

From the March 4, 2009 Issue

Easter Commentaries

Palm Sunday – April 5

Mark 11:1-11 - John 12:12-16 - Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

After exile, the Jewish prophetic mind knew two things: YHWH has left Jerusalem (Ezek 11), and YHWH will return to Jerusalem (Isa 52.8; Mal 3.1). Through word and deed, Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed himself the fulfillment of this prophecy. As the Messiah, he was the blessed king “who comes in the name of the LORD” (Ps 118.26), bringing with him salvation and peace (Zech 9.9-10). The people of Israel, understanding this quite well, welcomed him into Jerusalem with all the symbolic pomp and pageantry appropriate for the return of a victorious king of Israel (Mt 11.7-10; Jn 12.13-15). What they did not quite understand was that YHWH’s return to Jerusalem meant the city’s destruction within a generation, and that His throne would end up looking a lot like a cross.

Good Friday – April 10

Isa. 52:13-53:12 - Ps. 22 - Heb. 10:16-25 - Heb. 4:14-16; 5:7-9 - John 18:1-19:42

On the cross Jesus invokes Psalm 22, joining in the psalmist’s anguished prayer: God, I feel like you’re not taking very good care of me (22.1-2). You’ve always taken care of me in the past (22.3-12). But things are really bad right now (22.13-18). God, please take care of me (22.19-21). Hey, God is taking good care of me after all, even though don’t understand. Hooray! (22.22-31).

In other words, Jesus feels abandoned, but he knows he’s not. By faith Jesus is saying with the psalmist: God “did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him” (22.24). When we read Jesus’ cry this way, it fits with the rest of Scripture. Was Jesus forsaken when he cried out with tears to his Father? No. “He was heard” (Heb 5.7). “It was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain... [but] out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge” (53.11a). From within the darkened human mind, with all its mythologies of ‘the-god-who-forsakes-us,’ Jesus refused to believe the lie. He chose instead to know the Father’s heart by faith, and he found satisfaction through this knowing.

Because of his confidence, “we have confidence to enter the sanctuary...by the new and living way that he opened for us” (Heb 10.19-20). Everyone who follows Jesus on his path of belief/trust finds wholeness/healing/salvation (Heb 5.9). The “evil conscience” that condemns has been washed away. We can “approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith” (Heb 10.22), because of the truth we confess with our Lord: “It is finished” (Jn 19.30).

Easter Sunday – April 12

Acts 10:34-43 - Isaiah 25:6-9 - Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24 - 1 Cor. 15:1-11 - John 20:1-18 - Mark 16:1-8

The world has a judge, Someone who will heal the world by exposing the truth (Acts 10.42-43). The truth is that we are “oppressed by the devil” (Acts 10.38), that we live under the shroud of death, disgrace and tears (Isa 25.7-8). In our death-darkened vision we have sown evil and reaped the punishing consequences of our actions (Ps 118.18). The truth is that we are the builders who rejected the Stone of all stones (118.22), that we are ones who “put him to death by hanging him on a tree” (Acts 10.39).

But the truth exposed by our Judge is greater than this. The greater truth is that he has accomplished what was foretold: He has destroyed the shroud under which the nations have suffered. He has swallowed up death forever (Isa 25.7). He is the one who has made “for all peoples a feast” (25.6), a feast consisting of himself, his own risen flesh and blood, the first crop of New Creation.

Today is the day when we shout: “Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us... Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation!” (25.9). Our Judge has procured for us the healing/wholeness/salvation for which we have longed: “He has become our salvation!” (Isa 25.9).

He now keeps it for us, incorruptible in heavenly realms at our Father’s right hand (John 20.17). His Spirit now mediates to us his eschatological alive-ness, which fills those who believe/trust/rest in him (Acts 10.43). In short, the truth is setting us free. By “holding firmly” to reality rather than to myths, we “are being saved” (1 Cor 15.2).

Second Sunday of Easter – April 19

Acts 4:32-35 - Psalm 133 - 1 John 1:1-2:2 - John 20:19-31

When Jesus is with us, peace is with us (Jn 20.19, 21, 26). In his risen humanity, the Triune Life of Shalom is earthed forever with us. In Jesus “this Life was revealed...the eternal Life that was with the Father” (1 Jn 1.2). That Shalom-Life of fellowship now embraces us: “Truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 Jn 1.2-3). This fellowship is already achieved; it is a fact; it is truth. We participate in this fellowship by stepping into truth. We tell the truth about what we have done (1 Jn 1.8-10). We tell the truth about what Jesus has done: “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 Jn 2.1-2). By engaging with the Triune God in this way, we experience an intensification of aliveness (Jn 20.31), freedom from self-destructive patterns (1 Jn 2.1), and a progressive re-ordering of our relations in the world. This leads to communities of brethren who “dwell together in unity” (Ps 133.1), of “one heart and soul” as a visible sign and agent of Triune Shalom in the world through the Risen Christ.

Third Sunday of Easter – April 26

Acts 3:12-19 - Psalm 4 - 1 John 3:1-7 - Luke 24:36b-48

The Hebrew word for salvation (“Yesha,” from which the Hebrews derived the name “Yeshua”) contains within it the image of a shepherd moving his sheep from a tight, constricted space to an open space of freedom and possibilities. This is what Yahweh has done for us: “You gave me room

when I was in distress” (Ps 4.1). Because the LORD grants me space to live and move in his presence, “I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O LORD, make me lie down in safety” (4.8).

When the disciples recoiled in fear from the risen Christ, he made space for them to doubt and to learn. He invited them into the spaces opened in his flesh by the nails and the spear. And from within that open space “he opened their minds to understand the scriptures” (Lk 24.45), opening them to the possibility they had never been able to consider—that the Messiah would save them by dying.

Jesus took the inconceivable and made it conceivable. Peter follows the same pattern: ‘Through an act of impossible healing, he opens space for the Jews to consider the also-impossible reality of the crucified Messiah (Acts 3.16-19). Our Good Shepherd saves us by telling us what we are unable to tell ourselves. Our minds are barren and shriveled, but by His Word, they become living wombs in which inconceivable new creations are conceived.

~ John Stonecypher