

Weekly Reading – Monday, March 15, 2010

Before we turn to the lessons for Lent V, March 21, 2010, let me report that you readers have spoken and we shall not turn this into a blog with discussion/ comments. Okay, that's settled.

Lent V continues last week's theme of God's initiative, but with a decided emphasis on the nearness now of Holy Week, Passion and cross.

Isaiah 43: 16 - 21

"Behold I do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" The new thing in the context of the book of Isaiah is the return from Exile and the restoration of Israel. In the context of the day's reading and church year it is the crucifixion. One of the interesting things about this text is the way former acts of God are recalled, the Exodus and its way through the waters, but then the people are instructed to forget the past. The past, or our memory of it, is a mixed blessing. Yes, it can give us clues to God's plan and purposes, but the past, if we cling too tightly to it, can also blind us to God's work and presence today. Water also has two sides here. Pharaoh's army is swallowed up when the waters of the Red Sea close over them, and yet the Lord gives water in the wilderness, springs in the desert that his people may drink. Water is, as in baptism, both death and life. But the heart of this text remains the intrusive action of God.

Philippians 3: 4b - 14

If the locus of God's intrusion in Isaiah is the life of a people/ nation, here it is the life of an individual, Saul who becomes Paul. This is one of the several, many times really, that Paul's own experience is referenced. Here he notes his stellar resume: good family, best schools, right affiliations and neighborhood, so to speak. To trust in these Paul describes as "confidence in the flesh." But now all this counts for nothing. Think of the times in our own lives when things that were once so important suddenly became trivial and utterly unimportant. So it is for Paul. Paul who had been involved in his own righteousness, is now caught up in a larger story, caught up in the righteousness of God. Paul's experience is a move from self-dependence to Other-dependence. Then in the latter verses Paul maintains a tension between the already experienced and the not yet fully realized or complete. In other words, Christ's intrusion into his life doesn't mean he's arrived and he can now spend the rest of his life boasting about his conversion. This is delicate balancing act on Paul's part. He belongs to Christ, but the journey is not over, not complete. There are miles yet to be walked. But Paul walks them not in a human pursuit of God, but in light of God's pursuit and claiming of him. Again, God's initiative.

John 12: 1 - 8

Some version of this story appears in all the gospels, but John's version is distinctive. He sets it in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus in Bethany ("house of the poor"). He locates it just prior to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem for the final time. All of this makes it particularly haunting and dramatic. Mary pours out her expensive ointment as God will soon pour out his own Son, holding nothing back. One of the elements of the story that is especially provocative is that Mary may or may not be aware that she points to the impending Passion, that her act of devotion is also a prophetic sign. Her act may be, for her, one of gratitude, love and devotion and no more. But it becomes, as Jesus himself says, an anointing for burial. Meanwhile Judas protests the waste of such a large and lavish sum, saying that the money should have been given to the poor. In some ways, the aside noting that Judas was a thief lessens the force of this prudential argument. And yet, Judas' sanctified selfishness is hardly unique. How often are religious or idealistic reasons cited when the real agenda is self-protection or self-aggrandizement? So Mary's "wrong" act is the right one; while Judas' "right" argument is the wrong one. Sometimes, often, things are not what they seem to be. And so what soon seems a defeat, the cross, is God's way of victory.