

Divergence on the Lectionary - Passion Sunday, Year A

Because the Passion Narrative for this Sunday is so long, I'm putting a link here so that you can click straight to the Comments and Questions for Discussion if you'd rather do that than scroll and scroll (and scroll). ([Click Here for Comments and Questions.](#))

First Reading

Isaiah 50:4–9a

The Lord GOD has given me
the tongue of those who are taught,
that I may know how to sustain with a word
him who is weary.
Morning by morning he awakens;
he awakens my ear
to hear as those who are taught.
The Lord GOD has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious;
I turned not backward.
I gave my back to those who strike,
and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard;
I hid not my face
from disgrace and spitting.

But the Lord GOD helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like a flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame.
He who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.
Who is my adversary?
Let him come near to me.
Behold, the Lord GOD helps me;
who will declare me guilty? (ESV)

Second Reading

Philippians 2:5–11

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (ESV)

Gospel Text - The Passion of Our Lord According to Matthew

Matthew 26:14- 27:66
or Matthew 27:11-54

Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?" And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him.

Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the Passover?" He said, "Go into the city to a certain man and say to him, 'The Teacher says, My time is at hand. I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.'" And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover.

When it was evening, he reclined at table with the twelve. And as they were eating, he said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, "Is it I, Lord?" He answered, "He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born." Judas, who would betray him, answered, "Is it I, Rabbi?" He said to him, "You have said so."

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." Peter answered him, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." Peter said to him, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!" And all the disciples said the same.

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I go over there and pray." And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me." And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, "So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, "Sleep and take your rest later on. See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand."

While he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; seize him." And he came up to Jesus at once and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" And he kissed him. Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you came to do." Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him. And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?" At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled." Then all the disciples left him and fled.

Then those who had seized Jesus led him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders had gathered. And Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and going inside he sat with the guards to see the end. Now

the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward and said, "This man said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.'" And the high priest stood up and said, "Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?" But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your judgment?" They answered, "He deserves death." Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him, saying, "Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?"

Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came up to him and said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean." But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you mean." And when he went out to the entrance, another servant girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." And again he denied it with an oath: "I do not know the man." After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you." Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know the man." And immediately the rooster crowed. And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. And they bound him and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate the governor.

Then when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." They said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself. But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since it is blood money." So they took counsel and bought with them the potter's field as a burial place for strangers. Therefore that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, saying, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him on whom a price had been set by some of the sons of Israel, and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord directed me."

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Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You have said so." But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he gave no answer. Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?" But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted. And they had then a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up. Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream." Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said, "Let him be crucified!" And he said, "Why? What evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"

So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified.

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole battalion before him. And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they spit on him and took the reed and struck him on the head. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him and led him away to crucify him.

As they went out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. They compelled this man to carry his cross. And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall, but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots. Then they sat down and kept watch over him there. And over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left. And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, "You who would destroy the

temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way.

Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, “This man is calling Elijah.” And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.” And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.

And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, “Truly this was the Son of God!”

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There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, “Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, ‘After three days I will rise.’ Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, ‘He has risen from the dead,’ and the last fraud will be worse than the first.” Pilate said to them, “You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can.” So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard. (ESV)

Before I get into the Comments and Questions, I have a link here to a Word document with the Passion Narrative all typed out and set up for three readers, Narrator, Reader, and Jesus. (8.5x14, half pages, set up for a booklet) It would be easy to divide up the “Reader” portions for more readers if you like, and to edit it however suits you. If it will save you some typing this week, please make use of it! (link below)

The Passion of our Lord According to Matthew

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Any discussion of this text, or of the other texts in “Deutero” or “Second” Isaiah known as the Songs of the Suffering Servant (or, “Servant Songs,” for short) must begin with the question, “Who is the Servant of God” described in these songs. (Our text this week is counted as the third of four Servant Songs.)

We followers of Jesus are so accustomed to seeing Him and His Passion when we read passages like ours from Isaiah 50 that we forget that the prophet did not have Jesus in mind when he wrote or spoke those words. I know I keep saying this when we talk about many messianic prophecies, but I’m not quite arrogant enough to assume that you’ve read all the other Divergences that deal with these prophecies, or that even if you did, they were that memorable. Isaiah did not know that he was prophesying about Jesus. He had something else in mind, something else entirely. But *that doesn’t mean that Jesus isn’t included in the prophecy, as well*. When we read the prophets, it’s really important to keep in mind that they saw God’s heart, but saw it only partially. Only in Jesus is God fully revealed. So when Isaiah saw the Servant of God about whom he speaks in our passage this week, he spoke to the people to whom he’d been called to prophesy. He applied God’s heart to his own setting, and that’s not wrong. That’s what the Spirit of Prophecy does. It’s what the Holy Spirit inspires us to do in the present when we prophesy in the present.

But one thing about all this prophecy. It must conform to the One who is revealed in Jesus. And of course, in the case of these verses from Isaiah, they conform very, very closely. I have no doubt that when Jesus read these verses, He understood them to speak of Himself, as well as the Servant about whom Isaiah intended them. But who was this “Servant?”

Scholars have suggested that Isaiah might be speaking of himself. Or he might have had some other individual in mind. Or the Servant might be a representation of the nation of Judah. They have discussed and disagreed so widely and so deeply for so long that one

scholar I read basically said that the identity of the Servant is a problem “simply unsolvable by the methods hitherto applied.”

Among the many interpretations I’ve read or heard over the years, I’ve come to think that the collective solutions work best for me. Those being the ones that understand the Servant as Isaiah’s representation of the nation, or in the case of one author, the city, “Zion-Jerusalem.” The humiliation of, and subsequent exaltation of the city/nation seems to fit best with Isaiah’s vision of God’s people and their tribulations. Isaiah describes the nation as an individual several other times, in texts other than the “Servant Songs,” a woman, an man, a mother, a widow. That this pattern might continue within the songs makes a certain sense.

The other reason I lean toward this collective understanding of the Servant of God is that it makes a new sense of this application of the Servant to Jesus. Do I believe that Jesus read these verses and understood them to speak of His own humiliation and exaltation? Yes. (Sometimes I think this is why some scholars cling to the idea that Isaiah spoke of an individual. It makes the messianic interpretations a little easier.) But I also have come to believe that Jesus saw in these passages the link between Himself and the collective meaning of the Servant. He would undergo the humiliation of the Servant *on behalf of* the collective. His own people, His own nation, but also the “new Jerusalem” that would arise with His resurrection and ascension.

We who are baptized into Jesus’ death, are no less baptized into His humiliation. His resurrection? Of course. But in Jesus we are also present in the humiliation and vindication we read this week in Isaiah 50. Paul says it this way, in Romans, “Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” As we enter into Holy Week, I feel called, after writing this, to stop looking at Jesus’ Passion from the outside, “Oh, poor Jesus!” and try to understand how everything that happened to Him is a part of my own story as well. If Jesus could endure all this, “despising the shame,” how may I be called to live out that reality in my own day and time?

Second Reading

I can’t read this passage from Phillipians without hearing one of my favorite hymns, crashing in my head:

At the Name of Jesus,
Ev’ry knee shall bow.
Ev’ry tongue confess Him,
King of Glory now.

'Tis the Father's pleasure
We should call Him Lord.
Who from the beginning
Was the mighty Word.

I don't think I've ever planned a Palm Sunday (or Passion Sunday, if you prefer) liturgy without including that hymn. And I don't think there's a passage of Scripture that better summarizes why it is that Jesus is worthy of our worship.

It isn't that He saved us from death.
It isn't that He conquered sin.
It isn't that He rose from the grave.
It isn't that He healed and taught.

All those things are wonderful. Marvelous. But the Son could have accomplished His ends in any number of other ways.

What makes Jesus worthy of our worship, our praise, our adoration, what causes the angels to sing night and day, what causes the elders to fall on their faces and cast their crowns before Him, what causes all of that is the *manner* in which He chose to save us. Not with His power, not with His authority, but with His humiliation, His self-emptying.

That is what sets our Savior apart from every other "savior" or sage or prophet. That is what sets your Gospel apart from every other message from every other religion in the world. Your Savior gave up being God. For you, and for the rest of Creation. That is why the foundations of heaven shake at the angels' praise. That is why the saints' songs roar like thunder in the courts of the King. Because He did not count equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied Himself and became like us, suffering even to the point of death, death on a Cross.

Gospel Text

Honestly? The Passion is just a little too overwhelming to write a useful Divergence on it. But the Divergences' first purpose was to facilitate study of the Scriptures chosen for the Lectionary readings each week, and to that end I've created a study aid for the Passion Narratives. I've laid the three Passions from the synoptic Gospels out in parallel, trying to keep similar sections parallel to one another on the page. This will help identify the things that are peculiar to each evangelist, and help us try to figure out what motivated them to edit/compose the Passion Narrative the way they did. You can [DOWNLOAD THAT PDF HERE](#).

In the case of Year A, we're looking specifically at Matthew. So on pages one and two, we might note that between Judas' plan to betray Jesus and the instructions on where to prepare the meal, Matthew omits the long story of the woman who anoints Jesus' with the pure nard. If Matthew were using Mark as one of his sources, why would he do that? (I don't think he was. I personally think that Mark used Matthew.) Don't make too much of the absence of Judas' plot in Luke. For some reason I can't fathom, the folks choosing the lections just left it off. It's actually in Luke. (Of course it is.)

Then on page two of the guide you'll notice that Matthew puts Jesus' woes to the one who betrays Him before the institution of the Lord's Supper. Luke puts it after. Why do you suppose that is?

On page 5, Matthew includes a lengthy speech from Jesus after He rebukes the one who cut off the servant's ear that the other Gospels lack. Why might he have included that? I think there's a clue in Jesus' words, "But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?"

In some places it just wasn't possible for me to keep the parallel sections parallel. For instance, Peter's denial comes in a very different place in Luke than in Matthew. But I think that's more for a discussion of Luke, as he wrote later.

On page 8, Matthew includes the story of Judas' attempt to return the silver, and its use to buy the Potter's Field. None of the others has that. Why might that be important to Matthew and his readers?

Lastly I'll point to the post-script that Matthew adds to the Passion, that strange story of the chief priests and Pharisees going to Pilate and asking that a guard be posted on the tomb to prevent the theft of Jesus' body and subsequent claim that He had risen. Do you suppose that this was to counter a claim made by some that this was just what had happened? Why do you think it was included?

I know it's Holy Week, and you're probably really busy, but if you take time to look over the guide and have any questions pop into your head, I'd really appreciate it if you put them into the comments on this Divergence. I'll try to come back to them, if not soon, then at least when Passion Sunday rolls back around.