

Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary

Gospel of Saint John Written Assignments

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Part I: The Mercy and Justice of God

John's Gospel repeatedly shows that Jesus has not come for judgement but for salvation. This theme is also present in the Old Testament in the numerous mercies God faithfully offers to the Chosen People, despite their unfaithfulness to Him. The readings for the 5th Sunday of Lent-Year C, show the marriage between God's mercy and justice which brings salvation and joy.

The context surrounding the first reading from the Prophet Isaiah must be considered. A careful reading of the verses precluding those of the Sunday reading (Isa. 43: 16-21) enlighten the reader to the prophetic message of the text. Isaiah exhorts the Israelites to not be afraid. Although the Chosen People have strayed from God, they remain God's precious possession (vv. 1-7), they are the witnesses of His Salvation (vv. 8-12) whom He will deliver from the wilderness (vv. 14-21).

Three statements will focus the message of Isaiah in the above verses: Redemption comes from the Creator; Those who give witness to His saving works know the Truth; and God will accompany His people through the wilderness.

The thread connecting the essential message of the Prophet Isaiah is the paradox that God is both the Redeemer and the Holy One of Israel (v. 14). The Holy One must, in justice, punish sin.¹ Yet, the Redeemer rescues the sinful and brings them to newness of life. Such a paradox is answered in the perfect union of Justice and Mercy in God.

This marriage of God's justice and mercy lays the background for the first reading. The Chosen People are reminded of their deliverance from Egypt (vv. 16-17). This recollection gives hope for their future deliverance, from their current state of Babylonian bondage.

Indeed, God will continue His faithfulness to Israel and will redeem them from their bondage, but He will do so in a new way. Therefore, they need not remember the former things of old (v. 18). This "new thing" (v. 19) God is doing will provide a way, leading them out of the wilderness.

Desert and wilderness symbolize obstacles to deliverance.² The ostrich and the jackal (v. 20) inhabit such places. This passage seems to indicate that God's people are the wild beasts inhabiting a land of sin.³

The verse goes on to proclaim that God will provide water in the wilderness; desert rivers that will give drink to His people. Water gives life, even in the most barren, dismal, and deserted places. This gift of water will be the way in which deliverance comes.

Life-giving water is the clear sign that God is doing something "new." The former ways of deliverance involved water, but water that cleansed through destruction; the wiping out of evil. We see this former use of water in the flood, the turning of the Nile into blood, and the Red Sea engulfing the Egyptians.

¹Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1972), 152.

² Young, *Book of Isaiah*, 157.

³ Johnathan J. Armstrong and Joel C. Elowsky, *Commentary on Isaiah*, Eusebius of Caesarea (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 219.

But now, God is using water to perform a new wonder: a miracle of transformation through water.⁴ The wild beasts will not be wiped out; they will be made tame and will even give honor to God (v. 20). And the Chosen People who drink from the desert streams will give God praise (v. 21). God will therefore transform the wilderness and desert and tame the wild beasts by providing the life-giving waters of salvation.

The miracle of transformation through water is also present in Psalm 126, which is paired with the First Reading from Isaiah. A dry land, such as the southern country of Negeb (Ps. 126:4), would be transformed overnight by rain into a land teeming with vegetation.⁵ This image matched the Chosen People's amazement at the restored fortunes of Zion that seemed like a dream; as if they awoke one morning to see their fortunes changed overnight like the Negeb after a downpour of rain.

The Psalm continues the theme of deliverance from bondage which is a cause of great rejoicing. The Psalmist sets forth the significance of sowing and weeping; death is necessary for a new creation or growth. Those who go forth in suffering will return with the joy of having come to new life.⁶ Both Isaiah and Psalm 126 point to God's faithfulness in delivering His people, restoring their fortunes, and causing them joy. But the Psalm also reminds the reader that great joy is the fruit of a time of suffering; a kind of death that paradoxically leads to abundant life. The themes of deliverance, restored fortune, and joy born from a kind of death will serve as the hinges which will open the door between the Old Testament reading and the Gospel.

The opening scene of the Gospel places Jesus on the Mount of Olives, where he spends the night before returning to the temple to teach. Jesus emerges from a place of healing. Olive oil is a healing ointment. The Healer comes into the temple to teach. And He is about to perform a great, spiritual healing.

The Pharisees bring a woman caught in adultery and placed her in Jesus' midst. They tell Jesus that the Law of Moses requires them to stone her. They then ask him what should be done.

The Jewish custom of stoning sinners, in order to "purge the evil from midst of you," (Deut. 17:7) required that the sinner be condemned by two or three witnesses. One witness was not enough to condemn a sinner to stoning. Prior to the stoning, the Jews were to "inquire diligently," (v. 4) into the matter, "and if it is true and certain that such an abominable thing has been done in Israel, then you shall bring forth to your gates that man or woman who has done this evil thing, and you shall stone that man or woman to death with stones," (v. 5). The witnesses were the then the first to throw the stones.⁷

The Pharisees have put before Jesus a case demanding due justice. The Jews worked toward their salvation by the purging or destruction of evil from their midst. They are placing Jesus as

⁴Young, *the Book of Isaiah*, 157.

⁵Derek Kinder, *Psalms 73-150*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 440

⁶Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library, trans. by Herbert Hartwell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 762-763.

⁷James Gavigan, Brian McCarthy, Thomas McGovern, *The Navarre Bible: Saint John's Gospel*, Commentary by the Faculty of Theology, University of Navarre (Dublin, Ireland: Four Court's Press, 1989), 120.

judge over the woman, hoping at the same time, to find a cause to cast judgement on him for his reputation of being lenient⁸ at the expense of the law.

Jesus bends down and begins to write on the ground with his finger. When the Pharisees continue to press him for a response, Jesus stands and answers, “Let him who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her,” (Jn. 8:7). He then bends down and continues to write in the ground. It is at this point that the tables are turned. Jesus’ presence and words have pricked the Pharisee’s conscience. The Pharisees are now being judged by their own consciences. Jesus has spoken words of true justice. “Let the sinner be punished, but not by sinners; the law carried into effect, but not by transgressors of the law.”⁹ Faced with their own sin that condemns them, the Pharisees “went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest,” (v. 9).

Jesus’ response to the situation placed before him is telling not only in his words that cut to the heart but also by his posture. Notice the pattern of his “bending down,” or “stooping down,” to write in the ground. Then, he stands or lifts himself up when he speaks to the Pharisees.

The passage began with him sitting in the temple, teaching. He leaves his sitting position of teaching or authority to stoop down near the earth. This is the posture of humility, of mercy. Jesus, the Incarnate Word, stoops down to enter humanity. But when pressed by the ones seeking the destruction of the very ones he came to save; he lifts himself up to speak the words of justice.

It is telling that Jesus resumes his position close to the ground after his response to the Pharisees. He allows them the freedom to examine their own consciences before they turn to condemn the sins of another.¹⁰ Jesus’ words of justice have become a mercy for those who would have destroyed their own souls by seeking to destroy the life of another.

After the Pharisees go away. The woman is left alone with Jesus. In the Douay Rheims version, the words used for Jesus’ next posture is that he “lifted himself up,” (v. 10). The RSV states that he simply “looked up.” Whether or not Jesus maintained his posture of stooping low while addressing the woman, or whether he assumed the same posture as when addressing the Pharisees, his words to her convey a different tone, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” (v. 10). After her response, “No one, Lord,” Jesus responds, “Neither do I condemn you; go and do not sin again,” (v.11).

This encounter between Jesus and the woman caught in adultery hearkens back to Israel, the unfaithful bride of the Lord. God desires her salvation, delivering her from the destruction of sin, leading her through the wilderness of the desert, and bringing her back to Himself. How quickly the fortunes of the sinful woman changed when brought before Jesus, who renews and fulfills God’s marriage covenant with man.

The sinful woman has become a sign of the “new thing” God will do through the saving works of His Son. She strayed from the Lord in her sin; yet, she is still God’s precious possession; she now gives witness to His salvation after being delivered from the destructive wilderness of sin. Truly, her joy will impel her to go and sin no more.

⁸ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*, A Commentary on the Four Gospels, (Southampton: Saint Austin Press, 1997), 281

⁹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*, 282.

¹⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*, 283.

Part 2: Unveiling the New Adam

The Resurrection Account in the Gospel of John teems with life and symbolism. Jesus makes all things new (Rev. 21:5). Through His glorified body He reconciles man with the Father. He also fully reveals man to himself and reveals God to man.

A close look at John 20:1-10 uncovers how the Incarnation and Paschal mystery have restored and elevated man's relationship with God. This will change how man encounters God from the ways of encounter in the Old Testament; for Christ gives God a face that man can look upon without being destroyed.

The Gospel passage opens with "On the third day..." (Jn. 20:1). This is a direct reference to the Old Testament prophecy that God would raise man up, revive him, and give him life on the third day (Hos. 6:2).¹¹ His first sign, the Wedding at Cana also takes place "On the third day..." (Jn. 2:1). Hosea and Cana help us see Easter morning as the "Wedding Day" between Christ and His bride, the Church.

The Old Testament Prophets continually heralded the renewal and restoration of the marriage covenant between God and His people. Jesus has come to fulfill the law and the prophets. He chose his first sign to be done at a wedding. Now, His greatest and culminating sign, the Resurrection, restores and makes new the marriage covenant between God and man.

The "third day" also indicates that the Resurrection occurred on Sunday, which is the first day of the week, or the 8th day. In Genesis, this is the day when God's work of Creation ceases, and it is given to Adam the task to work in the garden.¹² Adam failed in his task of guarding and tending the garden; therefore, he was banished from Eden. But Jesus, the New Adam, who brings about the New Creation, does so in a garden, the place where they tomb lay. And on the morning of the third day, the disciples, Peter and John, are found running *into* the garden, after being beckoned by a woman- Mary Magdalene. They are beckoned back into the garden to take up their role in the New Creation.

When the beloved disciple arrives at the tomb first, he does not go in. His deference affirms Peter's role as the one whom Christ appointed as chief shepherd of the visible Church on earth. With the arrival of Peter, both apostles enter the sanctuary where the Incarnate Lord was laid. John relates the details of the burial cloths lying inside the tomb and the face cloth rolled up separately (Jn. 20:7). This face cloth (in Latin, *sudarium*; in Greek, *soudarion*¹³) veiled the Divine, Holy, Sacred face of Christ.

John's attention to this face cloth- this veil, which covered Christ's face is significant. Many exegetes have pointed out that the detail of the face cloth proves that Christ's resurrection was down by His own power as opposed to Lazarus who was raised by the power of God. Lazarus needed to be unbound by others after coming out of the tomb, but Jesus unbinds Himself.¹⁴ The

¹¹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 987.

¹² Professor Kelly Anderson, lecture on *Johannine Literature* (Philadelphia, PA: St. Charles Borromeo Seminary, recorded 3 July 2019).

¹³ Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 986.

¹⁴ James Gavigan, Brian McCarthy, Thomas McGovern, *The Navarre Bible: Saint John's Gospel*, Commentary by the Faculty of Theology, University of Navarre (Dublin, Ireland: Four Court's Press, 1989), 234.

detail of the face cloth has also been used to counter the argument that Jesus' body was stolen from the tomb.¹⁵

Other Biblical commentaries have connected the soudarion to the face veil used by Moses to cover his radiant face when he returned from God's presence. Such a face must now lay hidden from "ordinary, common" interactions.¹⁶ The veil of Moses served to separate that which was holy and Sacred from anything defiled or beneath the glorious purpose for which it had been consecrated.

Biblical commentator, Victor Hamilton points out that only in Exodus 34 is the face veil of Moses mentioned, although Moses encountered God on numerous occasions. This lack of mention does not indicate that only once was Moses' face radiant after returning from God's presence. Rather, "The veil (*masweh*) that prevents anybody from gazing on Moses seems to be replaced by the veil (*paroket*) that separates the holy place from the holiest place lest anyone gaze on the Holy One".¹⁷ After Moses, the glory of God remained in the Holy of Holies, where only the high priest could enter on the Day of Atonement. Even on that holiest day of the year, the high priest would prepare himself carefully and thoroughly for his entrance into God's presence. He would use so much incense that he couldn't even see the Ark of the Covenant, maintaining the mystery behind the veil.¹⁸

For Jesus to "put aside the veil,"¹⁹ indicates that man has access into the Sacred, intimate mysteries of the Trinity. Jesus is the new Moses; those who have seen Him have seen the Father (Jn. 17: 9). But His consecration differs from that of Moses; it is not meant to conceal Him from earth. Rather, Jesus' consecration draws man into His consecration (v. 19). Jesus reveals God's desire for intimate communion with those made in His own image and likeness. Jesus has elevated man's dignity of the flesh by taking it on and redeeming it from the shame it bears as a result of Adam's first sin.

The shame of sin required man to be clothed (Gen. 3:21). St. John Paul II speaks of this sense of shame in his *Theology of the Body*:

As the expression of the person, the body was the first sign of man's presence in the visible world. In that world, right from the beginning man was able to distinguish himself, almost to be individualized- that is, confirm himself as a person- through his own body... In this way, the human body bore in itself, in the mystery of creation, an unquestionable sign of the image of God... The words, "I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself" (Gn 3:10), witness a radical change in this relationship. In a way, man loses the original certainty of the image of God, expressed in his body. He also

¹⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*, A Commentary on the Four Gospels, (Southampton: Saint Austin Press, 1997), 596

¹⁶ Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus*, An Exegetical Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2011), 588.

¹⁷ Hamilton, *Exodus*, 589.

¹⁸ Anderson, lecture (10 June 2019).

¹⁹ Francis J. Maloney, S.D.B., *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, S.J. (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 523.

loses to some extent the sense of his right to participate in the perception of the world, which he enjoyed in the mystery of creation.”²⁰

After the first sin, man’s marred image could no longer encounter God face to face. The veil of Moses, the veil of the Holy of Holies, are a reminder that sin separates man from God. This separation caused man to be afraid of and to hide from God’s presence. Banished from the garden, man can only experience God behind the veil.

Jesus lays aside his burial cloths and reveals that which was hidden behind the veil. The shame of sin does not banish man from paradise; he is now welcomed into God’s presence with rejoicing, for God Himself seemed fit to take on human nature.

John’s Gospel gives a most profound testament to the unfathomable gift and mystery of the Incarnation. In the garden on the morning of the Resurrection, we see in Christ’s crowning work of Redemption the restoration of man’s dignity that was lost in the fall. We see the fulfillment and perfecting of all the Old Testament types that sustained and prepared the Chosen People for Christ’s coming. The Logos made flesh has brought man back to God.

The first Adam walked with God in the garden. When sin ruptured this relationship with God, it caused fear and shame to separate man from God’s presence and to veil from Divine mysteries. Jesus restores man’s relationship with God. The New Adam has lifted the veil. Before Christ, man had to cover and protect himself in the presence of God. But Christ uncovers Himself to be present among men.

The radiance of God is now capable of being seen with human eyes; the shame of sin is removed and laid aside. The veil that once concealed the Holy of Holies has been “torn apart” (Matt. 27:51), just as the tomb was rent open to reveal the power of God.

Peter and John gazed upon the glory of the Resurrection scene with their human eyes and were not destroyed. They entered the tomb, the temple, the tabernacle, the Holy of Holies, from which the new Temple- Christ’s own body, was raised after three days (Jn. 2:19-22). John gazed upon the sight; he saw the face cloth which veiled Christ’s face laid aside and he believed (Jn. 20:8). It could have been at that very moment when Christ’s prophetic words from the cleansing in the temple were now understood by the beloved disciple.

²⁰ Pope John Paul II, General Audience (14 May 1980), in *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1997), 113.

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