

The power of a long Gospel narrative (Good Friday) (John 18:1-19:42)

## **Read the Passion in John's Gospel. All of it.**

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The passage from John is long. How lucky we are.

When Pilate writes an inscription for the cross in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews,” he seems to want it read. Threatened by the truth it tells, the religious opponents of Jesus demand that Pilate qualify his text, to say “This man said . . .” But Pilate seems to know the power of what he's written—and that the writing itself was a performance of a truth that judged even him. “What I have written, I have written,” he says. The text has power.

When I was on a divinity school faculty, one of the classes I most enjoyed teaching passed as a homiletics class, but no mention of preaching was ever made. It was more a class in interpretation theory, but neither biblical studies nor philosophical theology would have welcomed it easily. A performance studies department might have taken it, but we had none.

Over the years since it's been a delight to meet a student now and then, five or ten years into their ministry, who reports that this odd little class was impactful and influenced their preaching. So it goes sometimes.

The class took a group through some exercises in traditional biblical interpretation and then through shared experiences in interpreting through performing. In this case we took on the Gospel of Mark. We scripted the Gospel, creating what speech professors used to call a “chamber reading.” We memorized it, word for word (in an

English translation). We rehearsed a lot, blocked our movements a bit, and performed the book, verbatim, for an audience.

A dozen years ago, when encountering the Gospel of John while planning Holy Week liturgies, I remembered that class. We ended up dividing John's text among four readers, rehearsed it, and offered it in its fullness to the congregation—as a sermon.

Rarely do we actually read this story at length. We cut it up into pieces too soon and lose its drama. Reading it long and well, without hesitation or pause, *is* an interpretation. It brings drama, which is a milieu in which the Holy Spirit is quite comfortable—not histrionics or play-acting but drama in the best sense. It brings forward themes and questions and intentions and obstacles. More conversations came from that reading than from some carefully composed sermons. I thought once or twice would be enough. But this kind of reading has become a part of our congregational life.

So read John 18:1–19:42. All of it. Read some of the text before and after it too, maybe even through the resurrection and to the end. Divide it up and get some people to read it together, with feeling. Tell it, as if it's a campfire story you know by heart.

Part of its power is in its length. Don't squander that power by shortening it. Give the Spirit time to work. The text has power.