

**The Servant's Challenge: The Suffering Servant**  
**Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Acts 8:26-40**

Today's passage from Isaiah is the most well known of the four servant songs. Through these words we are reminded of Christ's life and his sacrifice made for us. But before we talk about how the Christian church has interpreted this passage which is most often read on Good Friday let's go back a little further and think about what these words meant to the people of Israel to whom Isaiah first spoke them.

The people of Israel were in exile in Babylon having seen their way of life destroyed and all they held dear taken from them. They were living in a foreign land where they were despised and rejected. They were living in turmoil and filled with fear. There was physical misery compounded by growing doubts about their God who had not or could not fulfill the promised blessings resulting in a growing spirit of hopelessness. Into that world Isaiah spoke these powerful words of hope from God - for they, as the community of God's people Israel, would have seen their situation through the eyes of the servant in this passage.

*See, my servant shall prosper;  
he shall be exalted and lifted up,  
and shall be very high.*  
*Just as there were many who were astonished at him  
- so marred as his appearance, beyond human semblance,  
and his form beyond that of mortals -  
so he shall startle many nations;  
kings shall shut their mouths because of him;  
for that which had not been told them they shall see,  
and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.*

The Lord's servant would prosper - the people of Israel had a future. The nations of the world would

take notice. What those nations would see would cause them to stop and think deeply, reflectively on they had seen.

And what was the response of the nations to what they saw?

*Who believes what we have heard and seen?*

*Who would have thought God's saving power would look like this?*

No one expected suffering to be part of God's plan and yet that was the means by which God brought salvation to God's people. After all they expected their salvation to come through military might and kingly power but no. That is not what the nations saw. What they saw was that those whom they thought were rejected by God were instead delivered by God and raised on high by one who suffered for them. And his suffering was because they had sinned.

Friends, when we read the Old Testament, especially the prophets, we find over and over again that the people failed to follow God and that is what caused their suffering. Some things never change. Isaiah said it powerfully:

*But he was wounded for our transgressions  
crushed for our iniquities....*

*All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have all turned to our own way,  
and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

On the Day of Atonement, which we know as Yom Kippur - the holiest day of the year in Judaism, the priests provide a scapegoat for the people's sins. The high priest would lay hands on the head of the goat, confess the sins of the people, and then send it away into the wilderness. Those hearing this message heard clearly that their sins had led them into exile - into the wilderness.

But Isaiah's message was that exile was not the end of the story. God had other plans.

*Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.  
When you make his life an offering for sin,*

*he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days,  
through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.*

Israel as they had known it had to die so that new life could come.

That is the good news that God proclaimed again at the end of this passage. Hear how Eugene Petersen translates these verses in the Message:

*Out of that terrible travail of soul,  
he'll see that it's worth it and be glad he did it.  
Through what he experienced, my righteous one, my servant,  
will make many "righteous ones,"  
as he himself carries the burden of their sins.  
Therefore I'll reward him extravagantly -  
the best of everything, the highest honors -  
Because he looked death in the face and didn't flinch,  
because he embraced the company of the lowest.  
He took on his own shoulders the sin of the many,  
he took up the cause of all the black sheep.*

Is it any wonder that as the disciples reflected on Jesus' life that they saw echoes of truth in this prophecy related to Jesus? Jesus himself spoke of his need to suffer over and over again. But it is our New Testament lesson today that reveals that many who read these words after the resurrection - even a Gentile from Ethiopia - heard in these words from Isaiah truth about the life of Christ. Philip, in response to the Ethiopian's question, *proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus*. And then offered him baptism for the remission of sins.

Friends, from the earliest days of the church this image of the Suffering Servant has informed and shaped our understanding of what Christ did for us through his death on the cross and what we are called to do as his servants. It has been said that no other passage from the Old Testament was as important to the church as Isaiah 53. For when we read it we hear a vivid reminder of what Christ -

God's suffering servant - did for us.

*He was wounded for our transgressions,  
crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,  
and by his bruises we are healed.*

Friends, the good news of this passage is that Christ died for us so that we could live. Christ took on our sins on the cross so that we might be made whole - that we might have new life and healing. And in response to that great gift we are challenged to live as God's servants.

And yet in this passage we find our greatest challenge to becoming God's faithful servants. For because of Christ's sacrifice for us - in response to this amazing gift - we are called to submit our lives to God's will as Christ did even if it leads to suffering and death. Being God's servants does not mean living an easy, stress free life. It means sacrifice and seeing the world through God's eyes. It means doing whatever we need to do to bring in God's kingdom even if we are required to give up what we value and hold precious. God's desires must become our desires.

In the early church the first apostles were compelled to share to the good news. They believed so deeply in Christ and his message of salvation for all that they were willing to give up everything to follow in Christ's footsteps. In every generation since there have been men and women who have made a decision to follow God's commands, to put others needs above their own, to remain faithful to God's call upon their lives even in the face of suffering and sometimes death. They have been willing to sacrifice wealth, power, and even life to follow in the footsteps of the Suffering Servant. Within the last century Albert Schweitzer, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Archbishop Oscar Romero, Corrie Ten Boom and Mother Teresa are some of the best known to have made this choice. And yet the reality is that thousands upon thousands quietly make this choice daily throughout the world. And through their witness we too are challenged to live as God's servants.

Melvin L. Cheatham, a medical missionary, tells an extraordinary story from his experiences during the war in Bosnia. He was assisted by a local doctor, Dr. Josip Jurisic, as he operated on a soldier of the Bosnian Muslim Army. The soldier had been shot through the neck and was paralyzed from the neck down. In removing the bullet that had shattered his spine, Dr. Cheatham found it had blown his spinal cord in two and knew he would remain paralyzed for the rest of his life. The soldier had not been breathing very well when he arrived at the hospital. Knowing that because of paralysis of his chest muscles he would continue to have difficulty breathing after the surgery, they left the tube in his airway, placing him on a ventilator to help him breathe. The ventilator was powered with an electrical generator using diesel fuel because the hospital had electric power only intermittently.

The next morning as they made their rounds, Dr. Jurisic took Cheatham aside to a quiet corner where it was safe to talk and told him the bad news about the paralyzed soldier. “During the night the supply of diesel fuel ran out,” he said, “the generator quit working, his ventilator stopped, and he could not breathe on his own, so he died.”

Naturally Cheatham was sad, but what Dr. Jurisic said next stunned him and caused him to tremble all over. “Professor,” Josip said, “Because it was you who operated on the soldier and he died, I fear his people will come for you and will kill you. Therefore, I have changed the medical record. I have erased your name as the surgeon, and I have written my name in place of yours.”

For a long moment Cheatham says he looked into the eyes of this compassionate man. His throat became dry and he could feel a large lump forming. Finally he said to Dr. Jurisic, “But surely, my friend, that means they will come for you and will kill you.”

Dr. Jurisic said quietly, “You can leave this place of war, and I cannot. I am prepared to die in your place, if I must, in order that you might live.” Dr. Melvin Cheatham says, “When I looked at this physician, holding the report with his name in place of mine, I thought of the Great Physician, Jesus

Christ, who was willing to take my place and die for me on the cross.” (Billy Graham, How To Be Born Again

(Waco: Word Books, 1977 retrieved from <https://sermons.com/sermon/was-there-no-other-way/1445061>)

My friends, our challenge as God’s servants is to be willing as Dr. Jurisic was to give up our very lives, so that others might live. In ten days we will once again begin the season of Lent. Lent is a time of reflection on the life of Jesus and the sacrifice Christ made for us. As we journey to the cross this year remembering all Christ suffered for us my prayer is that God will reveal to us new ways to live faithfully in response to the gift of the Suffering Servant.