

Isaiah 52:13-53:12
Psalm 22
Hebrews 10:16-25
JOHN 18:1-19:42

“The Suffering Servant”

The passage we just heard from the Book of Isaiah is one of the most astonishing in the entire Hebrew Scriptures – “revolutionary,” one scholar has called it. And we are the beneficiaries of that revolution.

The standard, indeed the devout, assumption in antiquity was that people who suffer are cursed. The entire Book of Job was written as a protest against that view, represented by Job’s so-called “comforters” – that he must have sinned to have suffered so much, and that he must have been justly punished by God. That point of view so permeated the culture that Jesus’ own followers asked him (in John 9:1) “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

To be fair, this point of view was common in antiquity outside of Israel, and it is far too common today as well. Parents whose children I have buried have shared with me being treated as “contagious”; “lepers” by some others who thought it was bad luck even to encounter them. People who have suffered sometimes get “consoled” by people who say “it must be God’s will.” And repeatedly, we encounter ingrained attitudes of “blame the victim.” Sometimes people assume that victims of rape “brought it on themselves” by “dressing provocatively”; poor people are “shiftless and lazy,” and even victims of domestic violence may have convinced themselves that *they* are the guilty ones in some sense.

And, of course, the powerful and those who sympathize with them – and any who want to believe that there is justice in this world – assume that those who suffer *official* punishment must *all* be guilty and deserve however they are treated, which in some times and places can be truly hideous.

To all this Isaiah 52:13-53:12 stands as a loud, powerful and poignant challenge. *Who* exactly is this passage about? That is the enduring puzzle of this book. This is the fourth of four “servant songs” in the middle part of the current book of Isaiah, known as “Second Isaiah,” which dates from the late 6th century B.C. – the end of the exile of many Jews in Babylon. This servant passage particularly clearly refers to an individual, but there is no known individual in the history of Israel up to the time of its writing which it describes.

This passage describes a man who was not attractive; beauty was considered a blessing and its absence a curse. “He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hid their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.” The Servant is also described as the victim of violence, not (or not only) illness – which “we,” those now making a confession of faith and writing the passage, assumed to mean that he had been “struck down by God, and afflicted.”

But the “we” who are the authors of the passage confess that their assumptions were all wrong: “he was wounded for *our* transgressions, crushed for *our* iniquities,” and not only was he blameless himself, but by taking the punishment which others deserved for *their* sins, “upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.”

The whole notion that someone who is suffering is being punished by God for his or her sin is thrown out of the window. Not only that, the idea that sinners need to repeatedly make sacrifices – by donating animals to be killed sacrificially according to the old temple cult – to atone for their own sins again and again is *also* thrown over. Ancient attitudes and ancient religion are disposed of in a sentence. In its place comes the idea that someone – one person— could suffer and die for the sins of others, and by his suffering liberate and heal others.

Sound like anything you’ve heard which was written more recently than the 6th Century B.C.?

The authors go on to state that it was God’s plan that the Servant would suffer and die for the sins of others so that they may be healed. The authors definitively say that the servant dies – and also that *afterwards*, “he shall see his offspring, and he shall prolong his days.”

I have a very hard time imagining what those who first heard this writing, or first read it, understood it to mean. It fits the suffering and death of Jesus perfectly, as we can see today with the benefit of “20/20 hindsight.” But people centuries before Christ wrote it – certainly inspired by the Holy Spirit! – and perhaps knew that, like many other writings in the Bible, it meant more than its human authors understood. And Jews have continued to hear and read and copy this scripture ever since. Any Christian who finds no value in the Hebrew Scriptures has not read this one. Like many other scriptures, the oldest copy in existence of the Book of Isaiah was found in a cave on the edge of the Dead Sea in 1948 by an Arab shepherd boy looking for a lost goat: The Dead Sea scrolls of Qumran. Someone hid those scriptures there when the Roman army was about to obliterate their entire settlement in the First Century so that someone in the future would have 2,000 year old copies of these sacred writings. **We** here tonight are included in the legatees, the people for whom those scriptures were saved at the cost of the lives of those who copied them for posterity.

And **we** here tonight are mystically part of the “we” who wrote this passage as a confession of faith in God’s amazing plan of salvation over 2,500 years ago. **We** are among the sheep which have gone astray and need to be rescued; **we** are among those for whom this servant suffered and died.

“And by his bruises we are healed.”

Let us give thanks and live as healed, forgiven people.

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