

Isaiah 53 Suffering Servant
October, 17, 2021

Originally the so-called “Suffering Servant” passages in the Book of Isaiah referred to an obscure, to us, figure that inspired the people of Israel, or at least inspired the author of this series of poems. Some even suggest that nation of Israel *itself* is the Servant, meant to be a blessing to the world.

After all, this literature was written several hundred years before Jesus was born. Nevertheless, the early believers and countless Christian faithful since have seen these texts in light of Jesus or seen Jesus in light of these texts. For the Christian who has read them, it is nearly impossible not to see it.

It offers us a challenge in from of the connection between suffering and redemption, and not merely the redemption of the one who suffers, but of the ones on whose behalf the suffering one suffers? The conclusion we like to draw is that because Jesus suffered for us, we don't have to endure pain and suffering. We want life to be pain free.

Alas, life is not pain free, and one strategy is to avoid suffering at all costs under the supposition that it offers nothing valuable to the human experience. On a certain level it may be true that pain is meaningless, or worse, damaging; only someone afflicted with pathologies would seek it.

The bible does not ask us to seek out trouble, but it tells us the truth that pain is a part of life, and proclaims that God meets us there. If we are not to seek it out, we ought at least not take too much effort to avoid it. “All of life is suffering,” is the way the Buddha put it, and though we might want to argue the details, there is no use arguing the general point. That is the bad news. The good news is that on the other side of the pain there is more than just a Redemption, but a beautiful and precious life awash in meaning and joy, and peace.

The trick is to understand that the way to salvation is not by turning back at the first sign of trouble, or finding some way to get around it. Even if one does find a way to go around or avoid this or that, sooner or later it catches up . . . death comes to everyone. The way is forward, right through the middle of it. We are invited on a journey through.

The Book of Isaiah cannot be understood outside of a cursory knowledge of the time in Israel's history when it was written and read for the first time. One must not fail to understand that it came to a people who were being conquered. Being conquered is violent and demoralizing.

Prophets like Isaiah came along to help the people journey through the catastrophe. They could be harsh in the sense that they placed the responsibility for the decline squarely on the shoulders of the people and their leaders. Their denunciations were filled with wrath. But that was only part of the story. They also

saw the grace of God, so they could go back and forth between harsh criticism and hopeful encouragement. Their encouragement set before the people a new vision, a grander image of a larger world where God's mercies spread themselves over an ever expanding range. Isaiah's poems about the servant helped the Israelites at their lowest to hope again for a bright future for themselves and for the world. It is clear that Jesus understood himself and the earliest believers understood him in the tradition of Israel's prophets, none more so than the suffering servant.

In other words, Jesus is God's response to the suffering that is a part of life. On his way, we see him healing and feeding people and preaching the good news to the very end. Isaiah's poem also helps *us*. Every good thing points in the direction of the same redemption Just listen to excerpts from the poem:

“ . . . He hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for *our* transgressions, he was bruised for *our* iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed . . . Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he

hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors;

Here are some suggestions for the journey through:

1 - Don't go it alone. It is an easier and more rewarding journey with co-travelers. The church, with all of its untidy beauty, is made up of the people journeying together towards grace, through thick and thin. Let other people be the church to you. Be the church to someone else. 2 - Pay attention along the way, life-lessons are one of the ways the journey enriches our lives, teach us humility and faith, and brings us healing.

3 - Nobody can be Jesus, but each one of us will have small ways to imitate, pattern our lives after the example of Jesus, the example of Suffering Servant. 4 - Don't listen to those who would say there is no hope either for this life or the next. We can work to make a better and more just world and look to concerns about personal salvation, being faithful to both at the same time.

Take heart and be strong in your faith no matter what happens. Our salvation can not be taken away by an accident or a mistake or cancer or a pandemic or an election or by being conquered. It brings us here each Sunday and it is the meaning of our lives. Remember the beautiful truth that the one who has invited us on this pilgrimage through life has already been there, for us, and knows the way home.

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