

**Good Friday – Year C – April 2, 2010**  
**Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10:16-25; John 18:1 – 19:42**  
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“Who has believed what we have heard?” Having just heard Jesus’ suffering and death according to the Gospel of John, it is virtually impossible for us not to see Jesus as the anonymous servant of Isaiah’s enigmatic and prophetic words. There is no doubt that the prophets suffered and frequently died in the name of God. Nonetheless, the power of their powerlessness profoundly and repeatedly influences the lost and disobedient, those trapped in a web of sin and destruction, to repent and change their ways, according to God’s will.

The servant is nameless. Speculation abounds as to the real identity of the one who willingly defies death in order to remain obedient to God. This portion of Isaiah was written during Israel’s exile in Babylon. In that ancient context, it may reflect the sufferings of the whole nation. Some have even compared the servant of Isaiah to the prophet Jeremiah. Yet what is shared in today’s reading from Isaiah introduces concepts and realities that were not common to that period in Israel’s history. It seems to echo the earlier words of God also spoken through the prophet Isaiah (43:19, 24, 25), “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? ... you have burdened me with your sins; you have wearied me with your iniquities. I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.” This new thing is so startling that it silences the mouths of all the leaders of the nations of the world. This new thing is defined as perfect self-giving, one who will suffer – even unjustly – to death with a final twist. God exalts and lifts high His servant, redeeming the suffering. This is radical stuff. This is truly a revelation from God. As Christians, we have come to believe that God Himself in Christ Jesus fulfills this revolutionary prophecy. Jesus, who is fully divine and fully human, is God’s innocent servant. Only He can and does take upon Himself the suffering due to those who are truly guilty.

There is no precedent for the life of any human servant of God becoming an offering for sin anywhere else in Scripture. All such descriptions in the Hebrew Scriptures are reserved for the sacrifice of sheep, which is the required offering for the atonement of sin, according Leviticus (5:6). Yet here it is. The song of the servant whose life is given, once for all, to take away the sins of the world. Jesus, the Lamb of God, satisfies God’s justice perfectly and completely. Nonetheless, it is deeply troubling to read such a vivid and frightening description of an innocent servant so violently abused for the sins of others, including yours and mine. We rightly value life. Life *is* precious. So our hearts are troubled by Isaiah’s vivid description of the suffering servant. Yet the prophecy sheds an uncompromising light on how seriously God views human sinfulness, and how blessed we are in Christ. The servant’s suffering dramatically extends our understanding of God’s grace – it is neither cheap nor easy. Yet Christ’s suffering death may well be better understood as a gracious choice of God in Christ to willingly take on the punishment for human sin. Indeed the early church father, Origen, portrays Christ as both the free-will sacrifice *and* the high priest who offers it.

Good Friday seems to us like a black stain in history. The details of Isaiah’s prophetic words stab at our hearts, and wound us too. The suffering is fleshy and graphic. It makes **us** want to scream out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” There is the pain of society’s rejection of the servant as ugly and marred beyond human semblance. The tragedy of loneliness and rejection, of being despised for no good cause. The agony of bearing the sins and dis-ease of others – just like a proverbial leper. The horror of being crushed by God despite the servant’s innocence, and being bruised so that we might be healed. The servant is oppressed and finally slaughtered. On this day we recollect by gathering together, to stand with Christ in solidarity with all those who are still oppressed, beaten, abused, and silently murdered, frequently without cause or justice. Remembrance is an act of recollection by which we honor our Lord’s suffering, and all those who continue to suffer. Can we

think of no one who has suffered in this way? Let us take a moment of silent prayer now to honor all those we know, and all the nameless ones who bear the scars of another's sins. [ ] Lord God help us to know that by Your grace we are empowered to be co-creators with You in healing the wounds of a broken, bruised and fragmented world. Lord God give us the strength to hold on to the vision of this truth, even as we bear witness to our Savior's death on a cross. Lord God give us the courage to stand up for the powerless, and those with no voice.

The servant song challenges us to be aware of the moment and reflect on all those whom we have rejected, all those from whom we turn our gaze away. Who is that person for me, and for you? Is it the migrant worker standing on a corner hoping to find a day's work? Is it the homeless man or woman, sheltering in a battered old car, tucked away behind a screen of trees? Or maybe it's someone in our own family: our brother or sister, child or grandchild, the one whose very name embarrasses or angers us. Perhaps they have fallen off the wagon once again or broken yet another promise. Maybe it is one who has recently disappointed us for what we swear will be the last time. Farther afield, do the media images of appalling conditions in refugee camps in distant lands change anything we do to work for justice and peace in the world? Do the stories and pictures of starving children, with flies busily crawling over their faces prompt us to give time and voice to work for change to end the suffering? From our comfortable homes and relatively affluent lives, have we learned to switch off, and harden our hearts to the suffering and inequality of our neighbors both near and far? What do these people have to offer us? The servant song dares us to become more aware of all the ways we overlook the gifts of those whom society deems unattractive, disposable or despised. God desires that our acts of remembrance compel us to action.

Isaiah's prophetic words are yet another wakeup call for us. Eugene Peterson says it like this, "Who would have thought God's saving power would look like this?" The suffering of the servant, the continued suffering for so many around the world is an antidote to our hubris. Most especially to our pride of knowledge, and our arrogance in believing that we already have all the answers. Every one of us will wrestle, at some time in our lives, with the question of whether there can be anything redemptive in suffering. It seems so contrary to every fiber of our being and rational thought to find anything glorious in the gross injustice and agony of the cross. Christ taught us that in our own choice to accept the gift of faith in Him, we are to lose our self for the sake of righteousness. That we are to set aside worthless worldly idols in order to love God above all else, and love our neighbors as ourselves. These are not empty words or hollow promises. When we do as Jesus taught, we find that our hearts and hands are now free to pick up our own cross and follow Him in trust and faith. We know, often by bittersweet experience that the Lord shares our burdens, and that even when we suffer, our eyes and ears are attuned to the signs of God's redemptive gifts.

Today, we must pause again, standing in exile in the shadow of the cross, to experience the terrible knowledge that we are the ones – I am the one, and you are the one – who shouts, "Crucify!" It happens each time I turn my face away from any who are suffering. Just like the nations of the world so long ago, today we too must be shocked into silence at the revelation and reality of God's indescribable gift -- the mystery of God's gift of salvation, wrought on a cross. God's love in and through His Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ, restores and heals all creation in the most unimaginable way. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord" (Isaiah 55:8). What if the story of the anonymous servant lives on as a call for you and me to serve God in Christ today? As we stand, humbled in the shadow of the glorious cross, who can imagine our future?

Amen.