

The Glory of the Cross
Sermon 4- The Cross and Suffering

Passages: Isaiah 53:1-12
Matthew 27:33-54

Isaiah 52:12-15

See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. Just as there were many who were appalled at him—his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness— so will he sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand.

Isaiah 53 is a well-known and often-quoted text about Israel's *Suffering Servant*. But the full story about God's Suffering Servant doesn't really begin in chapter 53. This forlorn character is actually introduced in the final verses from chapter 52...the verses that were just read to us. Clearly, Isaiah wants to prepare us for the unbelievable story of chapter 53 by fixing that story within the larger context of a divine paradox. "*Here is the Holy One of God, the Righteous Servant of the Lord*", says Isaiah. "***On one hand, He is raised up, exalted to the highest place of honour! But, on the other hand, this same place of honour is also a place of abuse and hatred... a place where He will be beaten so badly that we will hardly be able to tell that he is still human!***"

Where is this place of contradiction? What kind of place could exist where God's Servant is both raised up and brought low...both honoured and despised *at the same time*? **The only answer is the cross!**

Jesus was all-too aware of this looming paradox! Only days before His crucifixion, Jesus spoke about the cross, saying; "***Now is the time for the Son of Man to be glorified!***" "***And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw all me unto me.***" He knew that the same cross that would be used

to kill Him would also be used to attract the world and bring glory to God!
How strange!

This is exactly what Isaiah has in mind! Coupled with the horror of the Servant's excruciating death we find an unexpected flow of divine blessing. From the heights of hatred and abuse, the Suffering Servant of God is able to "*sprinkle the many nations*" with His healing blood. And as a result of His gracious love, "*kings will shut their mouths because of him.*"

And so, in these introductory verses of Isaiah 52, we are being prepared for an unbelievable story about God's *Suffering Servant*. It's a story that no one had expected!

Isaiah 53:1-4

Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.

Insignificant; unnoticeable! Here was a man who was overlooked. Like a wildflower discreetly blooming in a barren field, we walked right past Him; we even stepped upon Him! We didn't recognize the treasure that stood amongst us. Instead, we treated Him with disdain and caused Him to suffer. And when we were finally confronted by His pain, just like Job's friends, we simply figured it was his own fault. We "*considered him stricken by God, smitten by Him and afflicted*".

In other words, we totally misunderstood who He was and what He had come to accomplish on our behalf. Because He led the life of a humble servant, we thought he was nothing-- we misinterpreted His actions as insignificant. Then, as His movement gathered momentum, we falsely accused Him of evil! It's no wonder that, when the text says "*He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows*", the image is of one who carries

the weight of the world on his shoulders... who bears in himself the suffering of a whole planet. Here was a man broken for us...broken by us!

Isaiah 53:5-9

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.

At this point in the story, we finally come to a point of self-realization. We had thought it was the servant who was to blame, but now we see that it is because of us that he is suffering. He was pierced because of our sins; He was crushed because of our iniquities.

Many of you have probably heard a legal interpretation of these verses that says that it was God the Father who punished Jesus on the cross as a way to satisfy His divine *justice*. What these verses describe here, however, looks nothing like *justice*. To the contrary, what is described here is a total *miscarriage of justice*. The Suffering Servant described in this text is a victim of mob violence. And yet, the strange twist to the story will come in the fact that it is “***By His wounds (that) we are healed.***”!!

How will that happen? How will our healing come through the evil of injustice? The key to understanding this paradox comes in the words that immediately precede it: ***He was pierced for*** (on account of) ***our transgressions***; ***he was crushed for*** (on account of) ***our iniquities***. In other words, Jesus suffered *because we are all perpetrators of hatred and*

violence on this earth. His innocent death was the supreme testimony to the way we destroy life and wilfully hurt our fellow human beings. Surprisingly, however, Jesus did not resist. Instead, He took it all into Himself! “**He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth!**” He allowed us to take His life. Why? So that we might see the evil of our sin, be shocked by it, and in our repentance, be conquered by His forgiving love. This is the only way that His wounds will ever heal us!

A few years ago, a woman told me that she had had several abortions during her younger, unmarried life. She was still carrying a deep sense of grief, guilt and self-hatred inside her. It was eating her up! And yet, whenever she tried to talk to people about it, some would make light of what she'd done, telling her that she had done nothing wrong. Others would make her feel like she was a "murderer". In the end, she had nowhere to go with her grief and guilt; no one to talk to about her feelings of self-hatred.

Her story is unfortunately typical of how our society tends to deal with many such issues. Either, we deny any sense of guilt or we insensitively heighten it with feelings of condemnation and judgement. Surely, there must be a middle way—and you know, there is; **the way of the cross!** There, at the cross, God meets us in our sin; He, the victim of all sin; the One who was unjustly broken and condemned. But He comes to us, not to condemn us but to save us...heal us! “***He who knew no sin became sin so that we might become the righteousness of God.***” He is ‘*Emmanuel, God with us*’—the God who forgives us in our darkness by sharing in our sorrow and grief. He was ‘***a man familiar with sorrow and acquainted with grief***’. And that’s why there’s no need to fear His embrace! Let us simply come to him with all of our mess...with all our brokenness and darkness...and be healed, for He wants to take the burden from us. That is what the cross is all about.

Isaiah 53: 10-12

Yet it was the LORD'S will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper

in his hand.

After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.

Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

It's hard for us to believe that this whole tragedy was God's plan! But it was! Even though it was unjust; even though He had done nothing wrong; even so, we are told that it was *God's will to crush Him and cause Him to suffer*. Of course, this is **not** because God *wanted* or *needed* to see his beloved Son suffer, but because **suffering is the inevitable result of radically loving those who oppose you**. Suffering comes whenever you make yourself vulnerable to others.

And that's the way of the Suffering Servant! What seems at first to be *weakness* is the way of unremitting *strength*. What seems to be *loss* is the *victory* of God. If the cross does not knock the wind out of you, if it does not blow your mind, then you have not understood it... for this is not merely some legal system or moral principle; it is *who God is; it is how God works!* As the Scriptures say, **"God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself"** (2 Cor 5:19). In the horror and ugliness of the crucifixion we see the saving power and glory and beauty of God.

[HYPERLINK "http://therebelgod.com/cross_notes.html" \l "note13"](http://therebelgod.com/cross_notes.html)

Jürgen Moltman once wrote:

"God is not greater than he is in this humiliation. God is not more glorious than he is in this self-surrender. God is not more powerful than he is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than he is in this humanity".

If we have the courage to *face* (and to *own*) our own darkness and brokenness, then we will find ourselves at the foot of the cross with God...a God who is more than willing to take our suffering into himself and, thus,

overcome it.

Just one last thought—When Isaiah tells us, in verse 10, that the Suffering Servant “will see his offspring and prolong his days...” do you realize who he is talking about? He’s talking about us...about the future generations of Christ’s disciples! We are His offspring... His brothers and sisters... found in every land and nation. But, of course, the title ‘*offspring*’ comes at a cost! We are His offspring, but only as we allow His image to be continually shaped in us. You see, the same God who came to save us now calls us to follow him in His way of servant-love. That means that we are called to look like Him...to be conformed into His image as God’s *Suffering Servants*. That is what it means to be *His offspring*!

Some of you may be asking, “*Does that mean that we are called to suffer like Christ?*” You tell me! What did the Apostle Peter mean when he said, “***Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.***” And what did the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews mean when he wrote, “***Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.***”???

Indeed, what did Jesus mean when He said to the first disciples, “***If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first...No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also...***”???

Clearly, we are called to be *suffering servants*!

Of course, this idea in *no way* diminishes the fact that Christ is the *Suffering Servant* of Isaiah 53...the One who died ***once and for all***. His death is unique! He is the one and only source for our salvation!

But we are His *offspring*... conformed into His image! We have been called to live out the same daily paradox that He went through—the paradox of **exaltation and honour**, on one hand, and **opposition and abuse**, on the

other.

We are His *offspring* because we make ourselves vulnerable to others. We ‘*take up our crosses daily and follow Him*’... Jesus, the Lord’s Suffering Servant.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen!