

Isaiah: The Suffering Servant
April 4, 2021 (Easter)
Isaiah 53:4-11a

This Easter Sunday our Bible Study scripture passage is one of the most important of prophecies for us as Christians. After the events of Holy Week, and the amazing but still mysterious fact of the Resurrection, the early followers of Jesus had to make sense of it all. They had memories of Jesus's words and actions. Some had seen the post-Resurrection Jesus. They could see miracles happening at the hands of disciples like Peter and John. But what did it all mean?

Just as Jesus, when tempted by the devil, referred to Scripture in order to make an answer, the early Christians sought enlightenment from the Jewish scriptures, The Law and the Prophets. Where in those scriptures could they find anything like what they had witnessed in the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus? Jesus himself pointed the way. In His appearance at the synagogue in Nazareth, he had read from the scroll of *Isaiah*. Luke quotes Jesus as reading *Isaiah* 61:1-2:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath annointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord. (Luke 4:18-19 KJV) ... And he began to say to unto them, This day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears. (Luke 4:21 KJV)

This reading, and Jesus's first words about it, announced Jesus's role as the messenger, the servant, identified by Isaiah. "The Acceptable Year of the Lord," more literal than "The year of the Lord's favor" in NRSV, meant the dawn of the Messianic age, that Isaiah and other prophets envisioned. So, it made sense for the early Church to continue to look in *Isaiah*, as well as elsewhere in the Prophets and other Jewish writings, for an understanding of Jesus.

Isaiah is a long book. It has 66 chapters, the longest in the Bible. Even if *Samuel*, *Kings* and *Chronicles* are not subdivided, *Chronicles* comes in at second place at just 65 chapters. But *Isaiah* seems to be the combined work of two different prophets. One is the Isaiah prophesying in the days of the kings of Judah, a contemporary of Micah, through the time of King Hezekiah. This was through the time of the fall of the Kingdom of Israel (the northern kingdom) to the

Assyrians, about 150 years before Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. Chapters 1-39 seem to be from this Isaiah of Jerusalem. The remaining chapters seem to be from the period of the Exile, indeed, late in that period. This can be seen from the prophet's references to the historical figure Cyrus, King of Persia, as God's instrument (Chapter 45), among other things. The writer of the material from Chapter 40 on is never identified. His writing style and message is somewhat similar to that of Isaiah of Jerusalem, although addressing a different time and place. As it happened, these chapters 40-66 were appended to the Isaiah scroll in the Jewish scriptures. There are theories that chapters 40-55 were written in Babylon, and 56-66 written later in Jerusalem, perhaps by a different author. If so, that writer was perhaps a follower or student of the writer of Chapters 40-55. The second half of Isaiah is sometimes called "Second Isaiah" or "Deutero-Isaiah." It is especially from these writings that we can see the prophesy that Jesus fulfilled.

Isaiah Chapter 40 opens with words of comfort for the Exiles in Babylon. These are familiar words: **Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD's hand double for all her sins. The voice of him who crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.** (Isaiah 40:1-5, KJV)

The theme of suffering by God's servant comes up repeatedly in the following chapters. Sometimes it is the prophet himself. For example, of himself the prophet writes, **For the Lord GOD hath opened mine ear, and I was not rebellious, neither turned away back. I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting.** (Isaiah 50:5-6, KJV). Sometimes the suffering servant is a personification of Israel, God's people. In today's scripture, the suffering servant seems to be someone else, a Messiah figure.

In our scripture reading, from Chapter 53, the prophesy focuses on the "suffering servant" of the LORD as an individual. These too are very familiar words. Again, I'm using the King James translation, since that is how we so often, and perhaps more familiarly, hear this: **Who hath believed our report? And to**

whom is the arm of the LORD revealed? For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground: 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. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth. He was taken away from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off from out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken. And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither *was any* deceit in his mouth. Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD will prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travails of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities. 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; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. (*Isaiah 53, KJV*)

Isaiah's Servant of the LORD seems mysterious and puzzling. But after the Resurrection, the disciples looked back, and in it, found a picture of Jesus. Jesus had lived a righteous life of service and teaching. God's hand was upon Him; that was demonstrated in mighty acts of healing and in His wise teachings. Yet, He suffered the fate of contempt, disregard, and death, just as had Isaiah's Servant of the LORD. (Notice that the writer is not talking about himself here; he is among the "we" who esteemed not the servant.) In *Isaiah*, at the end of Chapter 53, the Servant of the LORD is lifted up and satisfied, and will have a portion with the great. **"The pleasure of the LORD will prosper in his hand."** Just so, the Resurrected Christ appeared to his followers, having been faithful in his service to the LORD, and having, by that service, **"made intercession for the transgressors."** There were

many remaining mysteries. But in *Isaiah*, the disciples found an explanation that made sense, and around which the Church, and its gospel of Good News, was built. This explanation and understanding sustains us now, two millennia later. The prophet, writing about 600 years earlier, had understood what God was doing.

Our lesson writer points out that Isaiah's suffering servant is not a "scapegoat." The sacrifice of atonement described in *Leviticus* 16:8 ff. has two goats, one of which is chosen by lot to be sacrificed, and the other to be sent into the wilderness, "to Azazel," to carry sins away. The idea of the scapegoat is to carry the sins away from those being forgiven. There is no concern for the goat itself. It is just a vehicle, an instrument. In contrast, the Servant of the LORD bears the sins of the transgressors, those who have sinned, and does so willingly and in obedience to God. Those being forgiven may be, and are portrayed as, just as uncaring about the Servant as the ancient Hebrews were about the goat. But God does care. He elevates His faithful Servant in the end, and rewards Him.

This distinction from sacrifice and scapegoat to willing suffering for our sakes marks a distinct transition in Israelite, and Christian, perspective. In more ancient times, the effects and burden of sin were seen as almost tangible. The process of forgiveness was more like magic: certain rituals were performed, the burden cast off properly, and God would be satisfied. God was in Covenant with the family of Israel, but was angry at sin, and had to be satisfied. That perception gradually changed, especially in the words of the prophets. For Hosea and others of the later prophets, God was understood as wanting obedience to His law and righteousness, not for His sake, but for His people's. Amos pointed out that for the sins of oppressing the poor while wallowing in luxury, sacrifices are in vain. It is for our good, not God's, that he has given us rules to live by, starting with the Ten Commandments. It is God's love for humanity, and within that humanity, for each and every one of us individually, that Jesus's ministry, teachings, sacrifice, and Resurrection reveal.

Jesus chose to live out, literally, the role of the Suffering Servant in *Isaiah*. In doing so, he came to understand that he was the Son of God, the Messiah. But His call was to live that out, not as the Jews of his day expected, but as God called to Him. In his sacrifice, God's love, not just satisfaction of God's anger, became the basis for our understanding of forgiveness. God's reaches out to us in love. He shows that love through the ministry and sacrifice of Jesus. God shows us also what he ultimately intends for us in the Resurrection and the living Jesus, testified

by those apostles and other disciples in the Bible who witnessed Him. In love, God beckons us to stay in good standing as His children. We need no longer make animal sacrifices. We need not contrive to shift our burdens to scapegoats to be carried off into the wilderness, or cast into the sea. We need but ask for forgiveness for our trespasses in Jesus 's name, while living that forgiveness in how we treat others.

As Jesus told Nicodemus, **“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.”** (*John 3:16,17 KJV*).

Easter saw the fulfilment of the Suffering Servant's mission. Easter is the transition from the process of that mission to the spreading of the Good News of what has been done, God's triumph over Sin. We can proclaim, “He is Risen!” And answer, “He is Risen indeed!” For in Jesus's Resurrection, we can see where we are headed. John's vision of the future, and the Holy City come down from God, is described in the last few chapters of the *Revelation*. After all that, John gives a final message from Jesus.

I, Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star. And the Spirit and the bride [the new Jerusalem] say, Come. And let him who heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely. (*Revelation 22:16,17 KJV*)

We celebrate Easter every Sunday, rejoicing that God has given to us, all who truly want it, the water of life as a gift.

Prayer: *Dear God, may we read Isaiah as a song about resurrection as well as crucifixion, for “out of his anguish he shall see light.” Amen.*