

Isaiah: 6. Suffering Servant

Isaiah 53:3-6

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Nearly forty years ago, Dr. Karl Menninger wrote the book, *Whatever Became of Sin*. I was reading through the book last week – not that I have any doubt that sin has somehow gotten lost in my life or anyone else's. But we would like to think it has! Menninger tells of a well-dressed man who once stood on a busy street corner in Chicago. As pedestrians hurried by on their way to lunch or business, he would solemnly lift his right arm, point to the person nearest him, and shout out, "Guilty!" Then without changing expression, he would resume his stiff stance for a few moments before raising his arm, pointing at another pedestrian, and shouting again, "Guilty!" Menninger writes that the effect of this strange pantomime on passers by was almost eerie. They would stare at him, hesitate, look away, look at each other, and then at him again; then hurriedly continue on their way. One man who had been the object of the man's strange verdict turned to another and said, "But how did he know?"

Because we all know, don't we? It is possible to do something so wrong that it invades your life and stays with you, lives with you and you can't eat enough, sleep enough, work enough, lie enough to get rid of it. There's no amount of money that can make it go away. Somehow saying, "I'm sorry" doesn't make it right. Try as you might, you can't fix it. Many years ago, I greeted a young woman here at church – and let me say this woman will forever remain nameless, but she was expecting a child or so I thought. And when I greeted her, I said, "It looks like your due date will be here soon." And she gave me the strangest look and replied, "What do you mean?" And suddenly I realized this was not the person I thought it was. "I'm sorry," I said. "I was thinking of someone else." But the damage had been done - guilty. Men, I've learned there are times when it's best not to say anything. I felt ashamed – and just recalling that moment, I feel the shame all over again. So what do you do?

This morning, Isaiah points us to the answer, an answer that is found in the cross. These verses from Isaiah 53 come from what is known as the Servant Song. It is the fourth Servant Song found in Isaiah. The Servant Songs were part of the message that Isaiah delivered to the people of Israel who were living in exile – taken captive by the army of Babylon. These verses from Isaiah 53 are also central to our understanding of Jesus. They are quoted more often in the New Testament than any other passage from the Hebrew Scriptures. All four gospels, Paul and Peter look to this passage to understand who Jesus was. This is what Jesus came to do. He was a servant of the LORD who would suffer and bear upon him the sins of the world. But to the people of the 6th Century BC, living in Exile with no hope of ever returning home, Isaiah was saying, "God has not forgotten you."

Isaiah describes a suffering servant. When we read these verses, there is little doubt that Isaiah was describing Jesus. But for the people at the time of Isaiah, the suffering servant was the nation of Israel. In chapter 41: ***But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend, I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, 'You are my servant'; I have chosen you and have not rejected you.*** Several times in Isaiah, Israel was called the servant – a servant who suffered throughout history so that the world could see who God is and how the servant suffers for the sins of the world. And that is still how Jews today understand these words. They read them and see the Jewish people as the suffering servant, but after the death of Jesus, the earliest followers of Jesus read these words of Isaiah and saw Jesus and what God was doing through Jesus. Could Israel really have fulfilled this? Isaiah 53:5 – ***he was pierced for our***

transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. Could that be Israel? Could they bear the guilt of other people because they were innocent? Israel was not innocent, but Luke tells us that when Jesus turned toward Jerusalem for what we call this Holy Week, Jesus said: “The Son of Man must suffer many things...and be killed” (Luke 9:22). Verse 7: **He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth;** Jesus went quietly with his accusers, and he did not speak when he was before Pilate and the Sanhedrin. But Israel did not go silently. Verse 9: **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.** The Servant died among the wicked, and we remember how Jesus was crucified between two criminals. Jesus was laid to rest in a tomb provided by Nicodemus, a wealthy man. This was the Messiah.

Why must he, the Servant, the Messiah suffer? Why would God come in human form and then suffer and die as a common criminal through an instrument of torture? Why? Isaiah tells us why in the opening chapters that we examined six weeks ago – it’s the human condition. We sin, we mess up, we don’t do what we should. Isaiah says we follow idols and materialism (and the mega million lottery didn’t even exist then). Isaiah says that when we worship we go through the motions but our hearts are not fully engaged. Isaiah is talking about me! Paul would write in Romans: the things I should do, I don’t do and the things I shouldn’t do, I am drawn to do.

A week ago, I had a major computer issue. I was on a website reading an article about Isaiah when all of a sudden my computer was under attack. My security software detected a virus and in the process of removing that virus, several more attacked and the computer shutdown and would not work. I’ve had this laptop almost five years and everything I’ve done for five years is on this computer – every sermon I’ve written, every photo I’ve taken, my personal finances, my taxes that I still had not completed, the only notes I have for future sermons. It was all on the computer and suddenly it’s gone – and I had not backed up anything. I knew I should have backed it up, but I didn’t. Several years ago, I had a similar problem. I lost everything on the computer, so the next computer had two hard drives so everything would automatically be saved in two places – and we have a network server here at the church which is available to back up everything – if I would use it – but I didn’t do it. The week before I said to Jean – I think there may be a problem with my computer, and I should back up my files. She even offered a memory stick to do it, but did I? I knew I should but I didn’t. So last week when my computer stopped working, I waited until evening when I knew Jean had left and I left a message on her voice mail. I didn’t want to talk to her directly. Not because of what she might say, but because I was ashamed. The signs were there. Steve, you know what to do – but I didn’t do it. The Bible says this is how we are. We don’t do what we should do and we do what we should not do. Sometimes it is something we can’t talk about. We feel guilty and that guilt eats away at us. Wretched person that I am. God can’t love me – and maybe we stop going to church – because everytime we go, it is too painful – we feel that pain deep inside. That’s our human condition.

The Gospel tells us we need a Savior – one who can forgive you, who can atone for your sins and give you a fresh start. When a police officer pulls you over for speeding, you roll down your window and beg for mercy. You’re embarrassed and sorry. And the officer says, “I’m going to give you a way to atone for your sin.” And he gives me a little piece of paper and there’s a dollar sign with a number, and there’s an address where I can mail my atonement to pay for my sin. And I send it in, knowing I’ve done my part (at least until the insurance company finds out about it). But sometimes we cannot fully atone for what we’ve done. We know the story of Bernie Madoff – taking billions of dollars from unsuspecting people. He’s arrested, tried, sent to prison for the rest of his life. But does that really atone for what he’s done? Does that make it up to all who lost their hopes and dreams? There are things we do that we cannot fully atone.

In the Old Testament, 613 laws were given to the Israelites. All of the laws were meant to be kept but God knew the people would have a hard time keeping the laws, so God provided a way in which people could atone for their sins. Sometimes we sin accidentally and sometimes we sin on purpose. Sometimes we sin by what we do and sometimes we sin by what we don't do. The Old Testament said if you put out one person's eye, then your eye was put out. If you knocked out someone's teeth, then your teeth were knocked. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. And in doing so you would say I'm sorry and I will live with what you must live with. But whenever you sin against another, you also sin against God – so atonement was also necessary with God. The people would bring a lamb to the temple to make an offering for the sins that were committed. The people were saying, "I'm sorry, Lord, for what I've done. Forgive me and set me free." Then they would watch as the priest slit the throat of that lamb, knowing their sin came with a price – the life of a lamb. This experience was meant to move them never to do the sin again.

Isaiah said the day would come when God would take the Suffering Servant as payment, as the price for the sins of the people. One sacrifice for all time. Verse 4: *He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities.* John the Baptist would say at the moment of Jesus' baptism: *Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.* And at the Last Supper, Jesus would lift the cup and say: *This is my blood poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of you sins.* Jesus was doing what only God's Son could do – to be our offering of atonement, to make right what we can never make right. Here's what Paul says in Romans 5: ***You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.***

I have to admit there are times when I don't fully understand how this works, but then I've sat with people and heard the pain of their story, doing what they knew they should not have done and living with that pain, the shame and guilt eating away at them. Pastor, what should I do? I can't keep living this way. How can I be new? The answer is in the cross. Jesus paid the price for what you cannot do for yourself. The cross is for you and me. God is saying – you are in need of saving. I will forgive you and set you free. We often look at the cross and forget that there was a man suffering in pain on the cross, beaten, a crown of thorns, suffering. [video – scenes from the crucifixion]

Seeing the price that was paid for my forgiveness, I want to change. I want to live a different way. All you need is to say is Yes to what God would do for you.

Prayer

Dear Jesus, we would stand at the gates of Jerusalem and wave our branches high. We get caught up in the excitement of the parade. Let the joy fill our hearts. Help us to really mean "Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the Name of the Lord!" Let Jesus enter our hearts and transform our lives, for we ask this in his holy name. Amen.

Study Guide

Monday Holy Week reading: Matthew 25:31-46

In addition to the readings for Holy Week, we will also read three of the “Servant Songs” from Isaiah. We are introduced to the concept of a suffering Messiah. The kingdom that this suffering Messiah would rule is one in which widows, orphans, and the marginalized would be valued and one in which peace, justice, and equity are hallmarks. Israel understood itself with the suffering Servant. The Gospel writers recognized another figure, Jesus Christ, as the ultimate fulfillment of these passages.

- Read Isaiah 49-50. This chapter describes first the Servant’s call and then God’s promises to restore Israel. Yet Servant Israel was powerless and afflicted, proving that it was through God alone that the nations would be restored.
- Can you believe that God always remembers you and care for you? Do you believe that God can deliver you from the suffering you face?

Tuesday Holy Week reading: Matthew 26:1-5

Read Isaiah 51-52. These words are addressed to the people living in Babylon. Look back and remember; look ahead and realize that justice will come; look within and trust God. The defeat of Babylon by Cyrus was good news to the Jews because it meant freedom for the captives. For decades, they had suffered in a foreign land, without an altar or priesthood, but now they would return to their land, rebuild their temple, and restore their God-given ministry.

- Re-read Isaiah 52:7. What things does the messenger proclaim?
- In what ways are you working toward justice and peace in the world? How do you proclaim the good news of God’s salvation?

Wednesday Holy Week reading: Matthew 26:6-13

Read Isaiah 53. This last of the Servant songs is one of the most powerful passages in Scripture. The Gospel writers echo portions of this passage in Luke 22:37 and in Mark 10:45. The innocent Servant died in the place of the guilty. This is what is meant by atonement. In Israel’s religious practice, the innocent animal sacrifice died for the guilty sinner. For Christians, Jesus on the cross did not die because of anything he had done, but because of what we had done.

- What does it mean in your life that “by his wounds we are healed”?
- Remember that god’s kingdom was to be one of equality and justice, yet the Servant suffered unjustly. When you face unjust suffering, what model does the Suffering Servant provide for you that is helpful in the face of such in justice?

Thursday Holy Week reading: John 13:1-15

Read Isaiah 54. Today’s reading outlines God’s eternal covenant of peace with the people. This peace is not merely the absence of war but rather promise of an over-abundant life. The nation of Israel had been diminished, but god would help them multiply again.

- Look at Isaiah 54:10. How do you appropriate that promise in your own life?

- Join us for our Maundy Thursday worship at 7:00 p.m. The term “Maundy” is derived from the word meaning mandate or commandment. It was on this night that Jesus washed the disciples’ feet and then commanded them to go and do likewise. This will be reenacted during tonight’s worship.

Friday Holy Week reading: Matthew 27:15-54

Read Isaiah 55. In this passage, God invites the people to abundant life, one in which all needs are satisfied and in which God is near to those who call. All creation is renewed and rejoices under the blessings of God.

- How can you grow in rejoicing? How can you live under greater peace in your life? Today is Good Friday, the day on which we remember Jesus’ crucifixion and death. What relationship is there between god’s promise of blessings in Isaiah 55 and the passion story in Matthew 27?
- Plan to join us for the Good Friday “Tenebrae” Service at 7:30 p.m. It is a service of descending darkness as we hear the story of Good Friday and the music of Gabriel Faure’s Requiem (Mass for the Dead).

Saturday Holy Week reading: Matthew 27:55-66

Joseph of Arimathea requests the body of Jesus be placed in a tomb he has available. Some religious leaders request a contingent of guards be placed around the tomb to ensure the followers of Jesus cannot steal the body and claim Jesus rose from the dead.

Today until sundown is known as Holy Saturday. It is a day of prayer and fasting as we contemplate what happened on Good Friday and anticipate what God will do.

- Prayer for today: O God, creator of heaven and earth: Grant that, as the crucified body of your dear Son was laid in the tomb and rested on this holy Sabbath, so we may await with him the coming of the third day, and rise with him to newness of life; who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.
- Join us tomorrow for Easter worship at 8:45 (traditional) and 10:30 (contemporary). This will be the worship that celebrates what makes our faith possible.