

Isaiah 53:4-12 Bill Uetrict 10.14.21 21 Pentecost

At some point, we all have to deal with suffering. And when I say that I am not referring to the obvious reality that we all suffer. That's true. To be human is to suffer. No, what I mean is that at some point we will have to process suffering, must in some way figure what our suffering means. Honestly, we won't always figure it out. The meaning of our suffering sometimes evades us. But at some point, we will attempt to process it, attempt to deal with what it says to and about us, life, and God.

I experience the Bible doing that processing quite often. Our first reading from Isaiah 53 is for me an example of a community trying to process suffering. The scholars are all over the map in terms of who the suffering servant of Isaiah is. Some see it as Israel herself. Some see it as an individual like the prophet who is assuming a great deal of suffering because of his role as a prophet.

Who Isaiah is referring to we don't know for sure. But this we do know for sure. As the church told its story about Jesus, and particularly about his cross, it looked to Isaiah 53 to tell the story, to make sense of it. In fact, I believe that this poetry about a suffering servant who bears our infirmities, carries our diseases, is wounded because of our transgressions, is oppressed but does complain, and finally, is a victim of injustice is poetry that actually shaped how we told the Jesus story. It wasn't that this scripture predicted what happened to Jesus, but rather became a way for us to begin to make sense of what made no sense: the horrible suffering of a phenomenally good man, a man we thought was the Christ, the messiah, the one we were waiting for. Isaiah 53 became a means for processing the suffering of Jesus.

Isaiah's picture is of a person or of a community (Israel itself) that has endured more than its fair share of pain. At the end of the text, we are told that the suffering servant "bore the sin of many." Quite a few

Christians interpret this verse and others in our text to mean that the servant was some kind of scapegoat, that he took on the punishment that really belonged to other people. It's true that the scapegoat mentality has been around for a long time. In fact, Rene Girard argues that it is the oldest story told by humans. We are always looking for someone upon whom we can place the blame, someone who will serve as a focus for our struggles, a repository for our sins. And truthfully, Israel was gifted with the scapegoating theology. Animals were killed in the process of Israel trying to locate the guilt of its sin on something outside of the community and the individuals within it.

But honestly, I find the scapegoating theology a bit repulsive. Some thing or someone pays the price for someone else's sin? Jesus is God's scapegoat? God is mad about our sin and someone had to pay the price, and so, Jesus the Son of God, was the convenient victim. Ugh! Because you are mad at your wife doesn't mean that that dog has to pay the price. Because your parents or some other relative mistreated you doesn't mean that your kids or your spouse need to become new victims. Scapegoat theology is an ugly, slippery slope.

Now Isaiah 53 may include some scapegoating motifs, but I am not sure it has to be interpreted that way. When we read that the servant "bore the sin of many," perhaps what we need to think is that the suffering he went through was enormous. His suffering was that which many, many people should have to experience. When we are told that "he was wounded for our transgressions," maybe we should do as some Biblical scholars do and interpret the word "for" as "because." He was wounded "because" of our transgressions. Some people pay, or perhaps in the case of Isaiah, a nation suffers because of the terrible sins of people.

For me, Jesus died not as a scapegoat for our sins, but because people too often respond to love and grace with hatred. Love appears

in our midst, and we reject it. We crucify it. Jesus didn't die because God needed a scapegoat. He died because human beings can be too power-hungry, too self-preoccupied, too dominated by their false gods and their obsessions to receive fully the joy of unadulterated love and grace. Love and grace threaten so many of our projects, which too often are about us and our needs to justify our own lives. People, including us, by the way, suffer because of our sin.

I suspect that it was a major challenge for the early church to figure out the suffering part of Jesus' life. In many ways, it made no sense. Jesus was a really good man, a man who loved fully, who was about building a community of grace and forgiveness. Why would he have to suffer then, particularly in such a cruel and despicable way?

At some point in our lives, we will have to process suffering, especially suffering that is unexpected, seems unwarranted. The church had to do that processing in relationship to that suffering of Jesus, which is why I am convinced that we began to hear things like, "Jesus died for our sins." We've got to make sense of the suffering in some way. In part, I think in part that was what Isaiah was doing when he says of the suffering servant, "He was wounded because of our transgressions, crushed because of our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed."

The suffering of the servant was not in vain. It produced something good, something life-giving. Healing flowed from the suffering endured by the nation or by the prophet. It's a bold statement. Suffering brought health, not just inexplicable pain.

Now truthfully, we have to be careful with such statements. Many people will use a theology like that to downplay your pain and suffering. You will become a better person because of your suffering. Hogwash! Sometimes you simply became more bitter and angrier. There is not a rainbow in every rainstorm. Some suffering simply needs

to be eliminated. But our pain and our suffering are in part what has brought us to where we are. It is a part of the story that is our story. The cross is clearly a part of the Jesus story. And in some incredible way, it is an integral part of the story of health and healing that flows from his life. In the cross of Jesus we experience a God who participates too well in the suffering and pain that we know.

In Jesus and in his cross, we meet one who, as Hebrews says, endured the despair that comes from horrible suffering, causing him to offer up “prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears.” He was one who had the special status of being a son, yet still suffered horribly. In Jesus, we meet one like us in every way. In his cross, we meet the heart of God that embraces us despairing, suffering and broken people with love and forgiveness. His suffering in some unexpected way brings healing.

The church’s attempt to process Jesus’ suffering through the lens of the suffering servant of Isaiah is telling for the way we process our suffering. There is no doubt that the suffering servant known as Jesus was innocent, that he was a victim of “a perversion of justice.” He endured the sins of many, while living a life committed to love. He was faithful but a victim of our sin. But this victim did not victimize. He did not pass on the pain. He transformed it. Listen to the words of Richard Rohr:

The crucified and resurrected Jesus shows us how to transform pain without denying, blaming, or projecting it elsewhere. In fact, there is no “elsewhere.” Jesus is the victim in an entirely new way because he receives our hatred and does not return it, nor does he play the victim for his own empowerment. He suffers and does not make the others suffer because of it. He absorbs the mystery of human sin and transforms it rather than passing it on.

At some point, we will process our pain, our suffering. And I suspect that one of the reasons that processing is so important is so that we don't pass the pain on. Jesus didn't make scapegoats out of others. He received the pain, transformed it and didn't pass it on. Because our fathers treated us terribly doesn't mean that we need to treat our spouses or kids terribly. Because our ex-husbands or ex-wives produced an untold amount of suffering for us doesn't mean that we need to produce enormous amount of suffering for others. But that passing on of pain will occur if the pain is not transformed by a love and a forgiveness that is larger than us, a love and forgiveness that can be experienced in a suffering servant hanging on a cross.

And when we are captured by that suffering servant, life won't be about seeking revenge, getting even, passing on as much pain as we can, but rather about offering our lives to others in humble service. What we will want to pass on will not be pain and suffering, but love.