

Sermon for Palm/Passion Sunday, April 2, 2023
Isaiah 50:4-9a

Called to Suffer?

The prophet Isaiah is without a doubt the most important prophet in the Old Testament. Or I should really say, the “prophets” Isaiah. Did you know there was more than one? Most scholars agree that the book of Isaiah, as we have it in our Bible, is the work of three separate authors, whom scholars typically call “First Isaiah, Second Isaiah, and Third Isaiah.” *First Isaiah*, whose words we find in *chapters 1-39*, was active in Jerusalem during *the eighth century BCE*. Among other things, he warns Israel and Judah of coming judgment. *Second Isaiah*, represented by *chapters 40-55*, was likely written in the *sixth century* when the Israelites were in exile in Babylon. His focus is on the coming restoration. And *Third Isaiah*, which comprises *chapters 56-66*, appears to have been written yet later (in the *fifth century*) after the captive Israelites had at long last been returned to their homeland and had rebuilt the temple which had been destroyed.

So this morning’s text would have been written by Second Isaiah. During the exile. Which means the kingdoms of both Israel and Judah were experiencing a lot of suffering. And Second Isaiah was foretelling an end to the suffering. He begins his section of Isaiah with words that I suspect you will find very familiar: “*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid . . . a voice cries out: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill shall be made low.*” (That’s Isaiah 40:1-4, which were made famous in Handel’s Messiah. Words of comfort indeed!)

Ten chapters later, we come to this morning’s passage, and it is considered one of the four so-called “Servant Songs” in Second Isaiah, passages called that because they all specifically refer to a special servant. In the “**First Servant Song**” (Isaiah 42:1-9) the servant is introduced (and I’m reading just a few excerpts): “*Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him . . . he will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.*” **The Second Servant Song** (49:1-13) says a bit more about this special person: “*The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother’s womb he named me. He made my mouth like a sharp sword . . . and he said to me, You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.*”

The question begs itself. To whom is God referring? Is it the prophet Isaiah himself? That would certainly make sense. Prophets in the Old Testament were all individuals specially called by God (you could say they were all God’s servants). Or, might God be addressing all of Israel? Which is what the Second Song seems to clearly imply.

And then we come to the **Third Servant Song** (50:4-11, which is this morning’s passage). And we discover that this servant, whoever it was, experienced suffering. And in fact, he seemed to believe he was called to suffer. To not be “rebellious” [*“The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward”* (Isaiah 50:5)]. To not turn backward or away from the challenges he was facing. To give his back to those who struck him [*“I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting”* (Isaiah 50:6)], and his cheeks to those who pulled out the beard. (And those of us with beards know how much that hurts!) To not hide his face from

insult and spitting. Leading us to wonder, why was he being insulted? Why was he being spit upon? And, as God's ambassadors and servants, God's "chosen people," are we all called to face this kind of suffering?

And by the *Fourth Servant Song* (52:13 – 53:12) the language is downright intense. (I'm going to read just a bit more of this passage. You can follow along. "*He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account. Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases . . . he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed . . . the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter . . . the righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.*" Do those words from Second Isaiah sound familiar? And whom do they make you think of?

Today, as we have heard, is considered both Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday. And the "passion" part invites us in particular to look ahead to the suffering that Jesus of Nazareth would experience in the days following his "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem. (As I wrote in this past Wednesday's e-newsletter, "Here comes the king.") And it's no wonder that the last two Servant Songs in Isaiah, the Third and the Fourth, and the Fourth one in particular, are believed by some to foreshadow the life of Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Christ, Jesus the Messiah, who would not live on earth for another six hundred years. These verses seem to foreshadow the suffering he would experience. About which there is no doubt. We will listen to that story this Thursday evening.

There are many ways to suffer, and many causes of suffering. There is illness. There is injury. There is suffering caused by oppression, like that endured by the Israelites during their exile. There is suffering caused by punishment, and imprisonment. (Sometimes that suffering is undeserved, and sometimes it is simply the consequences of choices we have made. Like when parents allow their children to "suffer the consequences" of choices they have made.) There is the suffering caused by grief, the death of loved ones. There is suffering caused by broken relationships, and broken dreams. Is all of this suffering somehow God's will? Is it a sign of our faithfulness, a cross to be carried, a badge to be worn with pride? In which case, the more suffering, the better? No matter how badly it hurts?

Is suffering the sign of our faithlessness, proof that we have sinned, like the blind man in last week's story from the Gospel of John?

Or, is suffering simply an unavoidable part of life, something we all face, as Lloyd Anderson so poignantly shared this morning?

That's what I think. I do not believe that suffering is God's will. What I believe is God's will, God's desire for all of us, is simply that we be faithful to God, to God's teaching, to God's vocation, God's call upon our lives. And sometimes that faithfulness, when it's really hard, will come with suffering. That, I believe, is partly what we are seeing in the four Servant Songs of Second Isaiah, especially the Third and Fourth of those songs.

So again, I do not believe that God calls us to suffer, as if suffering in and of itself is God's will. But I do believe that God calls us to be willing to suffer. That a life of faith and faithfulness and obedience will sometimes come with suffering. Not the suffering of illness or injury or being born with a handicap of some kind, or the suffering we experience when a loved one dies. That suffering is not God's will; it is simply part of the life God has given us. But the

suffering—as Second Isaiah says, of having one’s beard plucked out, or of being repeatedly struck on our backs—that kind of suffering may very well come as a consequence of our faithfulness. Or at its most extreme, at its very worst, the suffering of being led like a lamb to slaughter, as Jesus was, the story of which we will again tell later this week.

And there is something else I believe about the relationship between suffering and faithfulness and God’s call. I believe we are called to suffer with those who suffer. God’s calls us to walk alongside those who suffer. God calls us, in a sense, to suffer with those who suffer.

That is the kind of suffering, and the kind of willingness, we find in this morning’s text from Isaiah. *“The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher,”* the prophet says, *that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.* Sustain the weary with a word. Is that not part of what we are called to do? *“The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame.”* Is that not what happens when we go to places like Haiti, or Israel-Palestine, or so many places in Africa? Places where people are suffering and where, just maybe, we have the courage to walk alongside them?

And is that not what we are called to do with one another? We will unavoidably all take our turn at suffering. But hopefully, if we are faithful, we will also all take our turns walking alongside those who are suffering. We are all called to be servants who sometimes do suffer—or are at least willing to. We are all called to be “suffering servants.” May we accept that call.

Amen.