

**Wednesday Evening Adult Bible Study  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church**

## **Fourth Servant Song of Isaiah Is. 52:13 – 53:12**

### ***The Suffering Servant***

Of all of the Four Servant Songs, the fourth song raises the most problems because the question of suffering raises many problems and questions in relationship to God. Where does suffering enter into the picture with regard to God? Is God the cause or is God the passive observer as the people suffer? Once again, the question of the identity of the Servant of the Lord enters the picture. Is the servant an individual, or a community? Yet, once again, the answer is that both apply to the model. Paul D. Hanson writes.

We do disservice to the bonds that unite us, therefore when we see individual and communal interpretations of the Servant as mutually exclusive.<sup>1</sup>

Hanson is talking about the debate about individual servant (Jesus) as this song has come to be interpreted in Christianity, versus the community of Israel as has been understood in the Jewish community since Isaiah wrote it. Hanson says,

At times we encounter what seems to be an individual with a divine commission to serve his people. At other times the Servant is Israel appointed as God's agent in relation to the other nations. Finally, there are instances in which the Servant appears to be a specific subdivision within Israel called into God's service on behalf of the rest of the nation or of the wider world.<sup>2</sup>

Whether the servant is an individual or a community, the life of the servant of the Lord is of benefit in God's hands, for the good of the many.

Visible in this adaptation is the theological perspective that permeates Second Isaiah. What is occurring in the experience of the Servant bears significance that extends far beyond the life of the Servant. The divine oracle that frames the composition indicates that the events of the Servant's life are episodes in God's providential care for the whole world.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Astonishment***

Looking at 52:13 – 53:3 we see the prophet's words from God with the promise that the Servant of the Lord will prosper, yet the path to prosperity for the servant is through suffering. Hanson writes:

---

<sup>1</sup> Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40 – 66, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995), 168.

<sup>2</sup> Hanson, 154.

<sup>3</sup> Hanson, 154.

The final divine announcement is that the Servant will prosper, but the path that leads to that exaltation is the path of a suffering unto death for the sake of sinners that was so terrible that it caused observers to be appalled.<sup>4</sup>

There is something new being put forth by God. The hero of the story, the one who restores the wounded, binds up the broken, and heals the sick is not one who comes in shining armor. Isaiah describes him as “marred . . . beyond human semblance,” with a “form beyond that of mortals.” His appearance is such that “he shall startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths.” There is a new revelation on the way. This servant was nothing special, “no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.” In fact, this servant is described as, “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.” (verse 3)

Hanson writes,

Yet the reason that nations and their kings are startled into wonder is not just, or even primarily, the severity of the suffering; it is the unprecedented nature, the absolute novelty of what they are seeing that drives them to silence. In this most unlikely of all places, among helpless exiled Jews, and more specifically in the presence of the most lowly of the kind, nations and kings encounter the awesome power that upholds the universe and determines the destiny of people.<sup>5</sup>

God chooses the most unlikely servant and through that servant accomplishes the unexpected restoration of the world. We need only to examine the people that God has chosen for the tasks. Abraham and Sarah were no more than ordinary tribal people, selected by God to found a nation. Moses was a man of poor speech asked to speak to Pharaoh and bring him to submission. Jeremiah was too young, a mere boy. Isaiah was a self-admitted “man of unclean lips.” Mary was a 14-year-old girl, Joseph a carpenter. Peter, James, John, and Andrew were simple fishermen. Levi was a tax collector. Paul was a persecutor of the Christians. Jesus himself, to all appearances was a carpenter’s son. Servants of the Lord appear as ordinary and often disliked and marginalized people. Yet, God works through them to bring about the divine plan for the world. That plan in the context of first Isaiah is the restoration of God’s people from the bondage of Babylon, and in the broader sense, bondage to the captivity of sin, death, and the devil. The greatness of God’s leaders is not always apparent on the surface.

### ***The Mystery of Suffering***

The mystery of God’s plan is that the events of the servant’s suffering have an impact and bearing on the lives of the rest of the world. Listen to the words of Isaiah:

- Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases – we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted (vs.4)

---

<sup>4</sup> Hanson, 155.

<sup>5</sup> Hanson 155

- But 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. (vs. 5)
- All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (vs. 6)

In the mystery of God's plan the well being of many lies in the servant's affliction. One person/one community afflicted bears the burden of the world transgression, and through the events of the servant's life, the many find forgiveness.

### ***The Sacrificial Life***

Isaiah turns to the language of sacrifice. The important message of the prophet is that this servant, thought, "oppressed . . . and afflicted . . . did not open his mouth. Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth." (vs. 7) This sacrifice Isaiah calls "a perversion of justice." The innocent is being taken to the slaughter without objection. Isaiah continues:

- For he was cut off from the land of the living (vs.8)
- Stricken for the transgressions of my people (vs. 8)
- They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. (vs. 9)

The value of this life given in sacrifice on behalf of the people is that the servant gave it without regret or thought of self.

Verse 10 presents the most troubling of the verses of this song, "Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain." There is something truly troubling about pain and suffering being considered "the will of the LORD." Hanson presents some insight into this image. Israel's time of exile and separation from their homeland and from the promises that God had given through Abraham and through the Exodus from Egypt were in connection with Israel's failure to remain faithful to the covenant that God made with the people. They broke the covenant, they ignored the divine justice of the law, and they followed other gods. Hanson says,

The answer that emerged out of Second Isaiah's inspired reflection was one that had been cultivated among the prophets over the long and troubled history of the monarchy. Israel had refused to uphold the terms of its covenant relationship with God by insisting on disobeying the commandments and turning to other deities. Should such blatant sin and apostasy be left unpunished, the moral structure of the world would collapse into chaos (42:23-25) *Mispat*, the universal order of divine justice, required redress. What is more, as undeniably bitter as was Israel's plight, it was the only recourse open to a God who sought to return a straying people to the covenant of grace through repentance, that is to say, by reawakening within human beings a desire for God's righteous and saving presence.

The exile, then, was a time of profound spiritual searching. Out of adversity arose leaders who dared to claim that God's mercy was being manifested even in the recent calamity and to invite the nation to reclaim their inheritance as God's children.<sup>6</sup>

In the final analysis, there are times in human history where people have gone so far from God's order and God's path, that the only way out is a jolt where we feel it most. Is pain the will of God? No! Obedience to God's plan and God's will, a relationship of love and the providence that God promises is the will of God. Unfortunately, there are times wherein we don't hear until adversity unfolds before us. It is then that we realize that God is the source of all love and all life and all things come from God. That is a difficult message, one that often doesn't sink in until the rug has been pulled from under our feet.

Hanson calls Isaiah 53,

Second Isaiah's contribution to this spiritual quest for an answer to the question of how the tragic pattern of sin and punishment would be broken and replaced by the wholeness that accompanies a hearty embrace of God's compassion and righteous . . . whose surrender to God's will was so total that he took the consequences of the sin of the community upon himself, even though he was innocent of any wrong. This of course is the stuff of martyrdom, which can be moving but totally ineffective in relation to the human plight unless accompanied by one critically significant dimension: "Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain" (53:10). The Servant is not acting alone. The Servant is serving God's purpose. Not tragic fate, but obedience to the Lord motivates the Servant to place no limits on self-giving love.<sup>7</sup>

That which is of vital importance is not the suffering. This is not suffering for suffering sake, but suffering that often accompanies an individual life when the path of the Lord is chosen over the path of the world. That which is of vital importance is the Servant's obedience to the will of God, even to the point of death. In this willing turn Isaiah 53:11b-12 "stresses an essential point that runs against the grain of human reason.

In the life of a lowly and despised human being, one appearing to be the antithesis of the glamorous ones admired by the world, God has been present atoning for the sin of the people . . . In other words, the Servant was not a pawn in the hands of an arbitrary god but one who had committed himself freely to a deliberate course of action. Not a victim of circumstances not a pathetic casualty in the ruthless atrocities that have always been a part of human existence, but one who willingly and obediently followed the vision of God's order of righteousness in defiance of all worldly wisdom and all human cowardice. Such was the Servant who chose to make his life an instrument of God's healing.<sup>8</sup>

There have been many throughout the history of Israel. The prophet Isaiah described his call in chapter 6. In the midst of his admission of sin, God sent the Seraph to cleanse his lips to speak God's command for return from sin. Isaiah's response was not to stay in the vision, but when God asked, "Who will go for us, who will speak for us?" Isaiah responded, "here am I, send me." In their time of exile, Daniel was sent as a righteous

---

<sup>6</sup> Hanson, 156.

<sup>7</sup> Hanson, 156, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Hanson, 160.

person to aid the people in their return to faith in the LORD of Hosts. Daniel's message was one of trustworthiness. God can be trusted. Jesus certainly understood himself as the servant of the Lord. His message preached in word and action was one "giving his life as a ransom for many." Jesus preached to his followers, "If anyone would come after me . . . take up your cross and follow me." Pharisaic Judaism developed a communal dimension to the servant of the Lord, "identifying the faithful Jewish community as the Servant."<sup>9</sup> They also developed a dynamic faith in the Messiah who would come to redeem the sins of the people and reestablish the people back in their home land.

### ***God's Will Wills Out***

Verses 10b-12 presents God's recompense for the servant that gives out of obedience to the will of God. Hear the text:

- When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the LORD shall prosper (vs.10b)
- Out of his anguish he shall see light, he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge
- The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous and he shall bear their iniquities (vs. 11)
- Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great and he shall divide the spoil with the strong because he poured out himself to death and was numbered with transgressors;
- Yet he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors (vs.12)

Death and life, darkness and light exist side by side in this text. Death for this servant does not stop the prosperity of God's plan, in fact, it promotes it. Neither does death forgo the prosperity of the Servant. Is this a reference to resurrection? It is in our Christian understanding of the self given sacrifice that Jesus gave for the world. Jesus poured out his life for the atonement and the forgiveness of the transgression of the world, and raised to life eternal.

The community of Christ, the church is called to follow in these footsteps. As we follow against the current of the world and society where "might makes right" and "God helps those who help themselves," the church will suffer. It will be considered to "out of step with reality" and perhaps ignored. It's already happening. Look around to see how the position of the church has diminished in the eyes of the society. It is hard to see how the selfless giving of our Christian lives for the good of the world will bring about. However, what can unselfish love produce around us? It staggers the imagination.

The Rev. Dr. Kipp W. Zimmermann

Wednesday, July 25, 2007

© All rights reserved. Any use of this material must carry this copy right. Brooklyn NY, 2007.

---

<sup>9</sup> Hanson, 163.

