



SERMONS THAT WORK

Good Friday

Behold My Servant

[RCL] Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10:16-25 or Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42

At no time do we stand closer to the mystery, the hiddenness, the total *otherness* of God than we do at this hour, at this moment, at this cross. At no other time do we see how completely *not-us* God is. This cross isn't something we know or understand or have room for in our world or in our lives. Not one of us would do this or allow this. We would gladly die to stop this from happening to someone we love, most of all to our beloved child. There's no room in our world for this. How do we approach this day, how do we begin to understand it?

As with so much else, perhaps the best place to begin is with the people of Israel and their story. God promised Abraham that, through him, all the peoples of the earth would be blessed—that it was Israel's vocation to show the world who God is and what God is like. To begin to grasp the barest hint of what is happening here today, we must go to the people of Abraham—there's no better place. Nowhere else in human history or in human thought can we find even the smallest insights into the mystery that we see full-blown before us.

It begins with a different tragedy. Six hundred years before Jesus, the Babylonians descended upon Jerusalem and destroyed it. They weren't content with destroying the city; they wanted to destroy the inner strength of its people and of their society as well. So, they rounded up the leaders of the community—all the people who in our time would be bankers, and lawyers, and doctors, and teachers, and professional musicians, and union leaders, and clergy—and they bound them in chains and led them on the long northward trek to Babylon to become the servants and slaves of their captors.

Fifty years passed. Fifty years of bitter servanthood for the exiles and their children. The Psalms are filled with their hymns of tears, and through the Psalms, their tears became part of their tradition—and of ours.

And then the Babylonian Empire fell to Persia, and a different Great King struck a different policy. Cyrus the Great let the servants go home; he let them return to their own country and rebuild their land.

Through both the darkness of exile and the first rays of hope, Israel kept asking, "Why have we suffered so much? Why us?" And a poet appeared among them, a poet-theologian, who wrote songs of unsurpassed

beauty to suggest a hopeful answer to those searching questions of human grief. He was a new genius, who was led to suggest an idea that, quite possibly, no one had ever suggested before. He said something about a nation and a people that had, quite likely, never been suggested of any nation and of any people before his time. He sang new songs, different and amazing songs. These songs come to us in the middle of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, and today's first reading is the heart of these songs.

This magnificent prophet focused on the servant status of his people. They were slaves and servants in bondage and oppression, and the poet took this image of servant and re-worked it in terms of glory and salvation. It looked as though his people were servants of oppression, but actually, they were servants of God. And their suffering, when born in hope and as an act of faith, was the key not only to their salvation but to the salvation of the world.

For the first time in human history, the mystery of sacrifice, which had almost universally been a part of the religious life of the people, was seen as more than a way of giving an angry or a hungry god something it needed, or wanted, or demanded, or deserved. For the first time, sacrifice was seen as a rejection of the world's categories of worth, value, power, and victory, and was understood instead both as God's way of faithfulness and redemption for his chosen people, and as *the* hidden path to the salvation of all creation. The songs of the servant in Isaiah are about this, and they are new songs.

Jesus himself grew into his own sense of vocation and mission under the power of these words, and perhaps he saw himself as that servant, and his path as that way of gentle faithfulness that all too often leads to suffering. This cross is what that faithfulness finally came to look like *in his world, at his moment*. The inspired song from Isaiah is revealed in its fullness, and with its greatest power, in the agony, defeat, and shame of Golgotha. To be a Christian means to sing this way. It means to look for, and to find, in this peculiar and distressing direction, the depth of God's truth.

To be sure, I'm not suggesting that all suffering leads directly to salvation. Even less do I want to imply that suffering is somehow a good thing and that we would all be better off if there were more of it. Nothing as simplistic or as facile or as grotesque as this is going on here. Nonetheless, the suffering of Christ who was made the slave of oppression and who was vindicated as the Servant of God goes on—and it's still the key to the world's transformation.

In Jesus, and in his cross, we can begin to see how this ancient poet of Israel, so long forgotten and ignored, was given the gift of seeing into the deepest heart and soul of God. In spite of what the world thinks, in spite of what seems to us the way things are and the way things have to be, in spite of our own values, hopes, and dreams, in spite of all of that: Here is the meaning of life; here is the way of God; here is our hope, and the hope of our world.

And there's more, for if we fasten our attention so single-mindedly on this one moment, this one day in the past, that we can't recognize the brokenness of our own hearts and the brokenness of our own world, as God's eternal key to new being, then we will have missed the central point. This is not just about back

then, and it's not just about *this* cross.

The hope hidden in this cross continues; we can make it our own. We can recognize that only here can our own inner divisions, our own sinfulness, our own brokenness, receive the possibility of healing and of wholeness. A great rabbi¹ once said, “There is no heart so whole as a broken heart.” Such is the fruit of this sacrifice. But remember, as with Isaiah’s Servant and as with Jesus, the wholeness we receive is for the life of the world.

Here, at this cross, is also given the opportunity to discover once more that today’s servants of oppression—the poor, the victims of war, famine, and callous indifference, the dis-valued of the earth, the *others*—that these are the clearest face of Christ for us today. In their suffering, we may see the very crucible in which the work of God is now being forged—for God’s work is to bring to all creation the truth of his Servant, and so to bring his vision of hope renewed to all humanity.

On the one and only day we call Good, we stand at the foot of an ancient mystery of sacrifice and salvation, given poetic voice by the rivers of Babylon and fully revealed only here. We can choose to embrace this mystery, this path, as our own, or we can turn away, and seek our own path. And we will do one or the other.

What it means, what it *looks like* to embrace this path—to choose faithfulness over security, to choose self-giving love over self-protecting alternatives, to choose painful honesty over comfortable denial—to struggle to move this man on a cross to the center of our lives and of our character. What this *looks like* in *our* world, at *our* moment, cannot be predicted, let alone described. It probably won’t *look* like this cross, but it may well *feel* like it from time to time. There’s just no telling. That’s part of our mystery, and of our hope. But this cross is the path of life.

“Behold my servant... he shall be exalted and lifted up.”

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¹ Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav (1772–1810)

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