

Text: Mark 10::42-45 and Isa. 52:13-53:6

Title: “Servant”

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Let me give you a question to focus your thoughts: How is Jesus a Servant to You?

In our culture, a servant is a person who has a lowly role—one who cleans your house, or who brings your meal and keeps your coffee warm. But in fact, one who serves us might do things for us we could never do for ourselves. An example that’s literally close to my heart is the cardiac surgeon who extends life by doing bypass surgery. Servanthood, then, is a person’s attitude about themselves and those they serve, not about the importance of what they do.

One of the ways Jesus is referred to (and by which he refers to himself) is as a servant. In our NT text, Jesus is talking about servanthood with his followers. He contrasts the gentile culture in which the more important people “lord it over” the less important ones. But he emphasizes in no uncertain terms: **“It must not be so among you.”** Then he gives his own mission as the basis for this: In Mark 10:45, he says, **“For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”** Jesus describes the purpose of his life on earth as to be a servant and to give his life. Let us mark carefully how closely and clearly Jesus ties those two things—serving and giving his life—together.

I. The Servant in Isaiah. One thing that occurs throughout Isaiah is that the shortcomings and the sins of the people are regularly being named and criticized. Another thing that happens throughout the book is that God’s mercy and forgiveness are regularly proclaimed. But nowhere are we told how this forgiveness is to come about—until we get here. Here we meet The Servant in the role of sacrificial victim—that is, as a stand-in for guilty, sinful people. Students of Isaiah will know that the Messiah in the role of Servant is first introduced in Isaiah chapter 42. But it is only here in 53 that we are told that the servant will suffer in our place. It is only here that we meet the one who has taken our sin and our brokenness on himself and accomplished our wholeness and healing. And it takes us a while to get the picture.

The description of the servant begins in Isa. 52:13 and goes to the end of chapter 53. Our text is the first portion of that material. Let me invite you to open the Bible to OT page 683, and follow with me while I read. It will be helpful for you to leave it open. This is poetry, and we will refer back to it. As I read, be alert for a couple of things. First, the condition of the servant. At the beginning (and the end, but that’s beyond our text), he is exalted, but most of the time he is suffering, and that suffering is misunderstood. Second, listen for the pronoun “we.” There is a community of people who benefit from what the servant endures, but they don’t understand that it’s for them that the servant is suffering until after his suffering is well under way or complete.

The text of Isa. 52:13-53:6 9 (NRSV)

(13)See, my servant shall prosper;

he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high.

(14)Just as there were many who were astonished at him

- so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of mortals—
- (15)so he shall startle [sprinkle] many nations;
kings shall shut their mouths because of him;
for that which had not been told them they shall see,
and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.
- (53:1)Who has believed what we have heard [our message]?
And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
- (2)For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
- (3)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.
- (4)Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.
- (5)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.
- (6)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.

The servant is introduced by God himself. The passage begins with, “See, my servant...” But then in quick succession the exaltation of the servant is followed by terrible suffering, which has given him the name “the suffering servant.”

II. The Community. This passage is, of course, poetry, with vivid word pictures, and with glimpses of things which the reader is then left to develop. The first 6 vs’s of chapter 53 is the testimony of the community which has come to believe, and which benefits from the suffering of the servant. The story is told in the past tense. They now understand what he did. They now understand that the ordeal he was enduring was for them.

Throughout the passage, the servant suffers alone.

In vs’s. 2 and 3, the image is of one who is suffering so much that people don’t want anything to do with him. They look away. They aren’t drawn in pity, they are repulsed.

In vs. 4, they seem to acknowledge responsibility for the servants’ suffering, but then conclude that God himself is punishing this person. Both are true, but in ways they don’t yet fully understand.

Vs. 5 is a turning point: the emphatic “But” beginning the sentence shows that they realize it is their transgressions, their sins, for which the servant is being punished.

Vs. 6 is reminiscent of a temple scene: the people confess that they have strayed and gone their own way rather than God’s. And God himself acts as the priest, who places the sins of the people on the sacrificial victim. The servant has substituted himself for the people, and is accepting the punishment for their sins.

The result of the servant's suffering are in verse 5. "upon him was the punishment that made us **whole**, and by his bruises we are **healed**." The result of the substitutionary suffering of the servant is wholeness and healing for God's people. That was true for the original recipients of this message, and it is true for us.

Let us reflect: the servant did this before the worshippers knew or understood. They didn't understand the cost to the servant. They didn't understand the extent of the blessing which the servant provided. And that's our situation. Issue is not just that Jesus did this 2000 years ago; it is that the sacrifice of Christ continues to heal us far beyond our understanding of its cost to him, and far beyond our understanding of the extent of the benefits of his death to us.

Jennie and I were just in Florida with our children and grandchildren. While we were there, we slept in a spare bedroom in the home of a member of our son's congregation. Althea, our hostess, is a retired elementary school teacher and a life-long Presbyterian. She is heavily involved—officer, choir member, serves on church committees. It turns out that Althea had just seen "The Passion of The Christ" along with many members of the congregation. I realize that the film is controversial, but I think this application won't be. What she said was, "Communion will never be the same for me again. From now on, when someone hands me a piece of bread and says 'This is the body of Christ, broken for you,' I will have much more than an intellectual grasp of what it cost Jesus. I will have a vivid understanding of the suffering he endured."

"Upon him," Isaiah writes, "was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed." "So marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals." Communion will never be "just another ritual" for her again, and she will never take what Jesus did to provide it for granted again.

"Shalom" is a relatively common Hebrew word. If you ask for a one-word equivalent, it is usually given as "peace." But for us, as in most languages, "peace" is the absence of conflict, or perhaps inner calm. Shalom, on the other hand, really means "well-being." It covers health, prosperity, security, friendship, and salvation. In vs. 5, the phrase "made us whole" translates the word "shalom." The servant's sacrifice was the payment for an eternity of wholeness and healing which we are only beginning to realize. The salvation that he purchased is all that we need.

We begin by asking how Jesus is a servant to you. Think about the community Isaiah describes. They received the benefits of the servants' suffering but only in stages and by degrees did they realize and accept that the awful suffering of the servant was for them and what made them whole. We are like that. Jesus has given his life in a painful death that we might be made wonderfully whole.

My prayer is that today, as part of your Lenten journey, you take a step in owning the death of Jesus for you, and in grasping the breadth of salvation he has wrought.