

*Cut Off from the Land*

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March 19, 2008 — Wednesday of Holy Week

Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Isaiah 53.7-9 (NRSV)

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,  
yet he 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.  
By a perversion of justice he was taken away.  
Who could have imagined his future?  
For he was cut off from the land of the living,  
stricken for the transgression of my people.  
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.

**The tearing of community**

I began thinking about these Holy Week sermons almost a year ago. One of the online Christian magazines I read had a series of pictures of contemporary religious art depicting in various ways the crucifixion of Jesus. I thought reflecting on that art might make for an interesting Holy Week series. So I downloaded some of those pictures and also looked online for other paintings, sculpture, and poetry. I collected a lot of stuff.

Then from time to time over several months I would muse on the pictures I found and read the lectionary's texts for Holy Week through the lens of the paintings. In January I settled on six paintings that we are looking at this week. Finally I paired the paintings with scripture.

Tonight's text is a few verses from the fourth of Isaiah's servant songs.<sup>1</sup> We'll come to the text in just a moment. The painting I selected for tonight is entitled "Not For Me," a work by a Los Angeles-based artist named Kevin Rolly. This is one of a series of his paintings reflecting the stations of the cross.

Unless you were raised Catholic, the Stations of the Cross are probably not that familiar. Sometimes the Stations are referred to as the Way of the Cross which in Latin is *Via Crucis*. The Stations are also known as the *Via Dolorosa* or Way of Sorrows. They depict the final hours and moments of Jesus' life and the devotion appropriate to remembering those moments. Many chapels, sanctuaries, and religious sites feature the 14 or 15 traditional Stations of the Cross. Observing the Stations is done most commonly done during Lent, especially on Good Friday.

This painting depicts the traditional eighth station of the cross where according to Luke's Gospel, Jesus "comforts" the women of Jerusalem. Luke says, "As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made

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<sup>1</sup> The four "Servant Songs" in Isaiah are: Isaiah 42.1-9; Isaiah 49.1-6; Isaiah 50.4-11; and Isaiah 52.13-53.12.

him carry it behind Jesus. A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. But Jesus turned to them and said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.’ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us’; and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?” (Luke 23.26-31<sup>2</sup>)

Rolly accompanied his painting with a poem also called “Not For Me.” I don’t know if he wrote it. But it expresses in words the emotion in the painting.

don’t ...  
if there are tears  
let them fall for you

the clouds of my eyes part  
to see what you cannot  
oh there will be a time  
when you wished that  
wombs were barren trees

the world is tearing in two  
because of me

Jerusalem! Jerusalem!  
you will become a garden of flame

winter ... winter ...  
and the fleeing of bare feet on jagged stone  
crash upon you  
the mountains  
weeping to the sea

When I read this poem and saw this painting, the words of the text hit me like an electric shock: “For he was cut off from the land of the living.” (53.8c) That’s what’s happening there. A wrenching apart of people, of friends, of loved ones. It is a tearing, a ripping of community.

So once again in this week most holy which is all about the Bible’s salvation story, we go back to the Bible’s creation story, this time to the second creation story. You know it. After God formed the *adam* out of the dust of the earth and breathed into that form the Breath/Spirit of life, the *adam* became a living being. And almost immediately God said that it is not good that the *adam* be alone and the *partner* was formed from the very being of the *adam*. Humans are formed by the very hand of God from each other and for each other. We belong to each other. We are to be together. We are

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<sup>2</sup> Except for verse 26, these verses are unique to Luke’s Gospel.

made to be in community.

So to be cut off from the land of the living, to be wrenched away from one's friends and one's community, is not just dying. It is the chaos and the darkness trying to destroy what God has created. It is darkness seeking to quench the light, chaos trying to overturn all that God has made.

It is the solemn mystery of this week most holy that the Suffering Servant — our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ — suffered being cut off from the very human community he came to save, so that we might live in his community with him and all God's people forever.

I don't know if you have ever noticed this. But most of the time when I do the benediction at the end of a worship service, I use what is called the apostolic benediction. It's taken from the last chapter of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. You've heard these words many times. "May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."<sup>3</sup> Except I normally don't say it quite like that.

When I say that benediction I almost always say "... and the *community* of the Holy Spirit" because I think that is what is really meant. By his suffering and death, Jesus Christ makes us his people, his community. He was cut off from the land of the living that we might be together. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>3</sup> New Revised Standard Version: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." New International Version: "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." King James Version: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all." New American Standard: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all." Greek New Testament: Ἡ χάρις τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἡ κοινωνία τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος μετὰ πάντων ὑμῶν.