

Good Friday
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas
18 April 2025

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

During the first half of the book of Isaiah, we see the prophet's message of judgement against Israel for their idolatry, violation of the covenants, and injustice against the widows, the orphans, the poor, and the aliens among them. Their hearts have become stone, unable to obey God and love each other. The prophet announces that God will use Assyria and, much later, Babylon to cut Israel down like a stump left in the field. This will be their judgement; the nation will be punished by the sword. But in the midst of this judgement, Isaiah announces that there will be a remnant of those who remain faithful to God and the covenants that will survive all this destruction. A shoot from David's line will lead this remnant to a New Jerusalem, where God's kingdom will become a reality. Until that day happens, Israel will undergo God's judgement. This first part of the book ends at Chapter 39, with a prophesy regarding the fall of Jerusalem (587-586 BCE), which became a reality about 100 years after the death of the prophet.

By the time the second part of the book takes on a message of hope, the people have been in captivity in Babylon for about fifty or so years. The second half announces a message of comfort: God will establish a kingdom under Emmanuel, a king in the line of David. God will give his remnant people hearts of flesh able to obey the laws of the Covenant. Finally, God will bless all the nations through his chosen people, Israel. The captivity in Babylon has come to an end and the people have paid the price for their sin. God has been with them throughout their captivity. In fact, God has raised the Medes to conquer the Babylonians, so that his people may be able to return home. The prophet hopes that after so many years in captivity the people may see all that God has done for them and will choose to obey and follow the covenants. In other words, now that God has orchestrated their liberation, the people will choose to be God's servant and finally become a blessing to the nations. Yet, the people complain that God has abandoned them, and they wonder if perhaps God is not as powerful as the Babylonian gods. By the end of chapter 48, God disqualifies that generation from being his servant. They remain a rebellious nation, and God will do something new to establish the kingdom.

Chapters 49-55, from which the passage for today was taken, introduce us to a figure described as the servant who finally fulfills the mission Israel has failed to accomplish. This servant will return the people back to their God, will be the light through which God will bless the nations, and will make God's kingdom a reality for the

whole world. We had been introduced to this servant in chapters 9 to 11, but now we are told how this Messianic King will accomplish his mission. He will take on the punishment of his people who will reject him, beat him, and kill him. Ironically, he will be dying for their sins. This is what the passage for today tells us about what the Servant goes through:

1. His appearance was marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals. (52:14),
2. He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. (53:2b),
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. (53:3).
4. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted... He was led to the slaughter like a sheep... He was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of the 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. (53:7-9).

The passage tells us why the servant suffered these afflictions:

5. He has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases (53:4a),
6. 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 (53:5).
7. 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 (53:6).

In Isaiah's prophesy, the Servant is vindicated with life after death, but his death remains the only way for people to be righteous with God. It is through his death that a right relationship with God is possible. In chapters 54 and 55 we hear that there are two ways in which we can respond to this sacrifice on our behalf. First, we can repent in humility for our sin and be grateful for what God's servant has done for us. If we do this, we will be the "seed" through which God will grow the Kingdom. The second option is to reject the Servant's sacrifice for us, in which case we will forfeit God's kingdom. We will choose perdition over the great blessings of the new Jerusalem.

Those who read the end of Isaiah are given a glorious vision of the righteous finally inheriting the New Jerusalem, a land of wisdom, love, peace, health, and immortality. "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth, the former things

shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice for ever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime... They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit... The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox... They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.” (Isaiah 65:17-25).

This is a peaceful kingdom in which opposites live together in harmony, without violence and death. I don't know about you, but I find it almost impossible to read Isaiah's prophesy of the Suffering Servant without thinking of Jesus of Nazareth. He suffered every abuse the prophet imagined for God's Servant. His death was a travesty of justice through which God has brought the entire world back into the fold. This death is bitter medicine that leads to a restored relationship with God. Through this death, those who belong to Messiah will obtain eternal life in the New Jerusalem, and this is possible because the Servant has paid the price for our sin, and we are found righteous in him. The Messiah takes our hearts of stone to his death and replaces them with hearts of flesh on resurrection Sunday. We are now able to obey God in and through the Messiah. Better yet, he obeys God on our behalf. He blesses the nations on our behalf. He fulfills Israel's vocation perfectly bringing the whole world to God and God to the whole world.

Now, we who are forgiven and redeemed, must share in the Messiah's mission of love and peace for the world. Our offerings will always be insufficient, but his blood purifies our intentions and makes our offerings pleasing to God. Our repentance will always be insufficient, but his blood makes our limited repentance a welcome offering to God. We will never be able to love as he loves, but we are now able to love as he wants us to love, with all our hearts. He will take our imperfect love and wash it clean of self-serving impurities, so that it is received by God with great joy. We who still wander off like sheep, each one of us in our own way, now have a road to return to our loving God. Jesus is the road, the way. I pray that today, we may raise our voices in gratitude to God for the sacrifice of his Suffering Servant. Without this sacrifice we remain lost in our sin.

May God continue to bless us. Amen!