

Authentication

From the Lenten sermon series: The Servant of the Lord

Text: Isaiah 53: 11; I Corinthians 15: 22-28

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

After all his pains he shall be bathed in light, after his disgrace he shall be fully vindicated; so shall he my servant vindicate many, ... himself bearing the penalty of their guilt. Isaiah 53:11

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. ... He must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet...that God may be everything to everyone. I Corinthians 15:22-28

God raised Jesus from the dead.

That is the great truth we celebrate on Easter. Jesus died. That is the somber reality marked in this sanctuary and around the world on Friday. As Jesus was hanging suspended between heaven and earth, they cruelly mocked him – the soldiers, the religious authorities, even those condemned with him.

Did he trust in God? They taunted, let God rescue him... Matthew 27:43

How that must have wrenched him. His whole life, his whole message was posited on trust in God. Where was God, the God Whom he addressed intimately as “Abba, Father”? Is it any wonder that that terrible cry of dereliction found expression in his awful agony, “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?”

He trusted in God; let God deliver him now...

But there was no deliverance; Jesus breathed his last. Jesus died.

Unless that black reality has seeped into the pores of our being, Easter will fail to appear in all its radical reality. Only the horrid darkness of Golgotha can adequately set the stage for the brightness, joy and wonder of Easter's dawn.

The taunters at crucifixion were not without profound insight. They knew everything hinged on God's intervention on behalf of His Servant. If heaven

remained relentless and Jesus really died, then put to death as well as all he claimed to be, all he claimed was true, the way he claimed to be God's way. Those who conspired to put him to death knew instinctively that if there was no move from heaven, no action from God, they had won the day.

"He trusts in God; let God deliver him now." Quite right. That was the issue.

If we are right - in agreement with the Gospel writers - that Jesus found his identity, the model of his ministry in the Servant Songs of Second Isaiah, then he must not have been surprised at the opposition he met in the days of his ministry. In the third of the songs, Isaiah 50:4-9, the Servant says,

I offered my back to the lash and let my beard be plucked from my chin; I did not hide, my face from spitting and insult;

Opposition and suffering must have come as no surprise. But the Servant was certain of the Lord's strong support.

... but the Lord God stands by to help me; therefore no insult can wound me. I have set my face like a flint...

Beyond the suffering and persecution there was the promise of God's support and the clear call

... to be my salvation to earth's farthest bounds. Isaiah 49:6

And so, on the model of the servant, Jesus carried on a ministry of bringing Salvation, a ministry of healing executed with compassion in gentleness.

... not breaking a bruised reed, not snuffing out a smoldering wick. Isaiah 42:3

All of that must have passed before his mind's eye as he felt death closing in as the tormenters reminded him that the issue at stake was whether his trust in God would be vindicated; whether he, the Servant of the Lord, would be vindicated.

O God, where are you now in my hour of desperate need?

Yet, there was more that must have been going on in the mind and heart of Jesus, ravished with pain, alone in his anguish. If he found his identity and destiny in the Servant Songs, then he knew well the, to us, familiar 53rd chapter of Isaiah. We have referred to it in this series twice, noting the Lamb led to the slaughter, the innocent one bearing the transgression of his people. *The Servant dies.*

... he was cut off from the world of living men; stricken to death for my people's transgression. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, a burial place, among the refuse of mankind. Isaiah 53:8-9

The Servant died.

Jesus knew he was precipitating a crisis in Jerusalem. He must have sensed the inevitability of death. The institution of the Last Supper certainly indicates that.

The Servant died.

Jesus was dying, but the taunts must have been sharp spears thrusting into his heart.

He trusts in God. Let God rescue him.

But God made no move; heaven was silent. The evil designs of threatened religion and political leaders simply unfolded with no sign of intervention.

But still there is more; the Servant of Isaiah 53 dies, but the Servant is also vindicated; *the Servant's life and ministry is also authenticated*. At the conclusion of the report of the Servant's vicarious suffering, bearing the transgressions of his people, we read:

Yet the Lord took thought for his tortured Servant and healed him ... so shall he enjoy long life and see his children's children, and in his hand the Lord's cause shall prosper. After all his pains he shall be bathed in light, after his disgrace he shall be fully vindicated. Isaiah 53:10-11

Jesus was dying. That could not have been a surprise to him. But, where was the vindication spoken of?

This, of course, was Jesus' supreme test; would he hold on trusting through his last breath?

This claim of vindication and authentication in the fourth Servant Song is amazing. There was as yet in Israel no knowledge of resurrection, no understanding of a rising from the dead. Yet here we have an idea set forth of which there was no experience and no general expectation.

The Servant dies on behalf of his people; God vindicates His Servant and the Servant is satisfied, content, that his mission is accomplished and his triumph is secured.

This message is entitled "Authentication." I contemplated using the term "vindication," which appears in the text (Isaiah 53:11 NEB). However, that term has taken on a nuance with which I would not like God's raising of Jesus to be associated. It carries the meaning "to clear from censure, criticism, suspicion, or doubt, by means of demonstration; to justify or uphold by evidence or argument," all of which properly applies to the significance of Jesus' resurrection. Yet it also conjures up images of vindication as avenging or revenge.

Therefore, I have chosen the word “Authentication.” It is defined as “to invest with authority, to give legal validity to, to establish the title to credibility of a statement, or of a reputed fact.” It carries the idea of authorization, genuineness. It is this that God accomplished in raising Jesus from the dead. Easter is God's mighty “Yes” to Jesus, to the way of life he portrayed, the salvation he offered, the God to whom he pointed. Resurrection was for Jesus authentication.

With real insight, the crucifiers taunted:

He trusts in God; Let God rescue him now.

God did; not before the mission was accomplished; but, miracle of miracles, when he had really died, God raised him from the dead. Resurrection is Jesus' authentication.

So what?

To answer that, we will move from the promise of vindication, life out of death, in Isaiah, beyond the narration of the event in the Gospel, to the consequence of resurrection in the Epistle. Paul's classic discussion of the reality of resurrection – Jesus' and ours - in I Corinthians 15 makes the simple, straightforward claim:

... The truth is, Christ was raised to life. (vs. 20)

He then draws the consequence:

As in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be brought to life.

Paul envisions an unfolding drama - the story goes on from Easter.

Christ, the first fruits, and afterward, at his coming, those who belong to Christ.

Israel gathered the first-ripened grain and offered it to the Lord - a sign that the whole harvest was God's. Using that figure, Paul sees Jesus' resurrection as the first instance of a general resurrection to follow at his coming - an event Paul thought was near. At his coming, history would come to its End. Paul understood Jesus to be reigning even as he, Paul, was writing. Jesus was overcoming all opposition to God's rule. When completed, he would overcome the last enemy, death. Then he would yield up the Kingdom to God and God would become all in all, or, “everything to everyone.”

Thus, in the resurrection, God authenticated His Servant Jesus and established a whole new order, an order Scripture speaks of as the new age, the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom Jesus had claimed was arriving in his ministry. Jesus was authenticated: his claim authenticated. His resurrection was a sign that everything was new; a whole new world was born.

We are already participating in that new order. We have passed from darkness to light, from death to life.

Once, by nature, we were “in Adam,” subject to death. Now, by grace, we are “in Christ,” recipients of life.

The old order did its best to defeat the gracious, saving purpose of God. Adam's race of which by nature we are all a part, crucified the Servant of the Lord. But God raised him up.

In his death he bore the transgressions of his people, he justified the many whose sin he bore. In his resurrection he gives life to his people. Because Jesus lives, there is a whole new reality.

The Kingdom of God, God's rule, acknowledged now by the Church, but one day every knee will bow, every tongue confess: Jesus is Lord.

Because Jesus lives, we believe every obstacle and all opposition to God's desire and design to save will be overcome. Grace will triumph over all the forms and structures of evil, of darkness, of injustice, of sin and death.

He trusted in God; let God deliver him - God did.

*And because he lives,
I can face tomorrow.
Because he lives, all fear is gone.
Because I know he holds the future,
and life is worth the living
just because he lives!*