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Isaiah 53:1-3 – Out of Dry Ground

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53 Who has believed what we have heard?

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 face
he was despised, and we held him of no account.

¹ We read in Acts, chapter 8 that an Ethiopian eunuch sat on the back of his chariot reading Isaiah 53 in dismay. Philip, sent to him by the Holy Spirit asks, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The eunuch responded, "How can I unless someone explains it?"

As you listened to the Scripture this morning, I asked you to look for the familiar in this text and think on what brings you some sense of comfort, hope and meaning. When we read Scripture – our minds often go to the familiar and what we have understood previously. The second time you heard the text this morning; I asked that you bring your questions to it – what is it that you don't understand or find hard to believe. My intention this morning is not necessarily to answer those questions but to remind us all that it is good to question Scripture and often questions can bring as much or more insight as answers. The questions give room for the Holy Spirit to speak. The too familiar can at times shut out the Spirit from breathing new life.

We tend to read Scripture backwards in the sense that we know the end of the story and so we go backwards and reinterpret the events in light of the ending – and that is often the right thing to do. We need to be careful, however, that we do not miss the message that was also there for the original listeners. ² We know that ultimately Jesus is the Messiah who fulfills the prophetic voice of this text. We see Jesus in this image most clearly as he is hanging upon a cross. There is a man of suffering, acquainted with pain, sorrow, sickness and death. We see how the crowds despise him and shout "Crucify him, crucify him and from the cross we turn and hide our faces from this inhuman execution – the ultimate rejection and shame. He has no form or majesty – raised in the

dry ground or backcountry - Nazareth. And we ask with Isaiah, how can the strong arm of God be revealed in this? How can God ever be revealed in the sorrow and suffering of our world? Isn't this a sign of God's abandonment, not presence? Isn't this the cry of so many who have turned their back and belief on God – "Where was God when . . ."?

Scripture is like an onion with layers and layers of meaning. God, through time and history peels more and more away to get at the heart of the truth so let's step back to the original listeners. Who was the "suffering servant" to whom Israel would have connected this text? Isaiah 53 is the fourth of the "Servant Songs" found in Isaiah. Isaiah 42 is the first, then 49, chapter 50 and now 53. Consistently through these texts, the reference of servant is to Israel herself. One example was read as our call to worship this morning from Isaiah 41:8 ³ *"But you, O Israel my Servant, Jacob who I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend, I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, "You are my servant; I have chosen you and have not rejected you. So do you fear for I am with you, do not be dismayed for I am your God. "*

God's chosen were called to be God's servants, bringing light and hope to the rest of the world. Listen to a different interpretation of our text in Isaiah 53 with the people of Israel in mind:

⁴ Who would have believed that the arm (the power) of God would be revealed in such a suffering people? Suffering is God's chief way of being powerful in the world! Israel's origins are unremarkable, like a plant struggling for survival in an arid land. Their appearance uncomely; they suffer rejection by their own community; pain and loneliness are their lot; The range of the suffering at the hands of others is amazing: despised, rejected, sorrowful, sick, assaulted, considered insignificant;

Even though we will see how this text points forward to Jesus as the One who will completely embody and fulfill this text of Scripture, we also need to find the message to Israel herself as the suffering servant. Consider all that Israel has been through as the people of God. They start out as a group of nomadic sheep-herders from the seed of Abraham. Abraham begets Isaac in a strange and miraculous way, who will beget the twins, Esau and Jacob who wrestle right in the womb to become the first-born heir in charge. ⁵ Jacob has his own issues but finally gets the family tree growing with 12 sons, only to be swept into slavery in Egypt where life is hard, but fruitful and they grow into a vast number of people that God eventually leads out of Egypt and into desert

wanderings for 40 years and a generation dies before they can move into Canaan, the promised land, which incidentally is already occupied.

Who would believe what we have heard about Israel and who would imagine that the strong arm of the Lord would be revealed in this motley group of people? No dryer ground could be imagined for such a people whom God would delight to call his beloved children! And so far, there have been few perks for being God's chosen – what “blessings” have they seen? The book of Isaiah was written to the chosen people of God who have risen and fallen, risen to fall again and again – to Egypt, to Assyria, Babylon, to Persia and the list continues to the 21st Century. The Jewish people have been a despised and rejected people, true. **Out of their story then it is all the sadder that these very people did not recognize the One, the Christ to come after who would embody their story so completely as to finally bring meaning and definition to their suffering and invite them into the resurrection.**

I believe that the message of Isaiah 53 to the original listeners of these words was to understand that the strong arm of God – the power of God was at work among them, even while in Exile and even as they dragged themselves back to a decimated Jerusalem to begin all over again. The evidence of God's presence would be revealed in their resiliency as a people well acquainted with grief. **God's strength is made perfect in weakness which speaks to this upside-down kingdom that God is establishing where success is defined by what you give, not what you get – where servants rather than CEO's get the honored seats at the banquet – and a widow's mite is a far greater treasure than a proud man's gold.**

Sometimes we want to differentiate the God of the Old Testament from the God of the New Testament, forgetting that God is the same, yesterday, today and forever. It is important for us to read the texts with the consistency of God's character as love, grace, mercy and justice in mind. There is much in the Old Testament that is hard to understand and like the Ethiopian with Phillip we wonder how we can understand it if someone does not explain it – and we don't always like the explanations either! Service and suffering is a consistent theme for the chosen people of God and that calling is fully realized in Jesus Christ. He is the suffering servant – he is the one who washes his disciples feet – he is the one who has nowhere to lay his head and call home – he is the one who is led like a lamb to the slaughter and “he never said a mumbling word” (as the Spiritual goes).

6 The one way we can get off track with understanding Jesus's journey to the cross is that we somehow think that Jesus took away our suffering – that his suffering replaced

our suffering, but that is NOT the message of the cross, nor the message of Isaiah. In this season of Lent our calling is to go with Jesus to the cross – to die to self – to die again and again to our need for a pain-free successful life - until we can surrender all with Christ on the cross with him. The consistent message to the people of Israel, culminated in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus now becomes this message to us, the church. Israel is the suffering servant. Jesus is the suffering servant and now we, the embodiment of Jesus - the church is now the suffering servant. I see five implications for us if this is our identity in Christ:

1) **7a Serving through compassion is our identity and calling** – whether as the people of Israel, the very Son of God or the adopted sons and daughters of God. We must, must, must serve a broken world, bringing healing to the wounded; resources to the poor; hope to the hopeless. We must sacrifice our needs for the sake of another. We must wash feet – however that symbolic act translates into action today. We are not put on this earth for personal gain – we are here to give, give and give – it is only in giving away our life that we will ever understand what abundant living looks and feels like. The word, compassion means “with passion” and the word “passion” is connected to the “passion of Christ - the cross.” We use the word passion as an emotional love for what we most desire – a passion for sports or music. True passions require sacrifice. The passion of Jesus was a passionate love for you and for me and he sacrificed everything for his passion. Our calling is to be passionate for one another and that passion will require sacrifice. And so . . .

2) **7b Serving brings suffering.** It isn’t always pleasant or fun. I’m glad that the youth were out this morning doing an act of service to the community around Henderson Lake but true service isn’t something we do as a one-off and then return to our comfortable lives. It isn’t attractive. One of the paradoxes of sharing the Good news of Jesus Christ to a world that loves comfort and beauty and wealth and power is that it actually doesn’t seem like good news. If you want to be a disciple of Jesus – there is actually a pretty steep cost to the deal. You might have to lay down your life for a friend – or even worse, for an enemy! And that brings me to my third point:

3) **7c Serving is unattractive.** It has no form or majesty - nothing in appearance that would draw us to such a calling. Who needs this really???? A couple of things happened in my ministry over the last few weeks – a harsh, critical letter received, a disparaging comment aimed at my husband and I can start to think – who needs this?? There is a lot of interesting data coming out that refers to the “nones” and the “dones” – those who have had no church experience and those who are done with the church

and left. Why do people leave church – often because they “don’t get anything out of it”. Well, I challenge you to find me a Scripture reference that says go to church because you’ll get something out of it. There is a lot of dry, arid ground out there that is not open to Jesus because the message is not attractive. What could possibly be good news in this calling to be a servant of God who demands all of me – who asks me to enter into the suffering of others when I’d rather live my own life, thank you very much. There is good news in this because . . .

4) **7d** **Serving Reveals God’s presence:** Do you know that loneliness is epidemic in North America? We have become so self-sufficient, self-reliant, self-entertained, self-helped, DIY – do it yourself, self-motivated, self disciplined, self-employed, self-contained, self-identified. We are so self-orientated that we seem to need no one. But darn-it-all, that self is not always reliable, not always capable, not always entertaining, not always motivated and is actually quite limited! Quite finite! Quite isolated – and left alone – we can become self-destructive. Loneliness hurts – it is deeply painful – so painful that some take their lives to end the suffering. We were not created to be alone; we were set in community where we could thrive. **8** And the only way that community can survive let alone thrive is if it is based on mutual submission and servant hood - not power and control. God created us for his presence to dwell among us – in essence to be manifest and revealed in community. We know that with God’s presence in our own lives - entering into our life of joy or sorrow, gain or pain - we are never truly alone. God indwells each one of us and carries us through each day. YET and yet God is primarily present in one another and we become God’s presence for one another empathetically entering into each other’s joy or sorrow, pain or gain because it is familiar territory as community. Pooling all of our experiences, together we are well acquainted with grief. We weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. This gift to one another can only come with the humble spirit of a servant – the suffering servant. This is our call and this is actually very good news. Instead of climbing a ladder to beat another out of top place, we help one another rung by rung until we attain new heights together. When one is in the pit of despair, we enter the pit and gradually lift them up and out. Who has believed what we have heard??? I have to believe – I must believe that this is good news for my lonely, lonely world.

What do you see in this image? Do you see Good News? Do you recognize compassion? Do you see the humility for it is not only in the giver but the recipient of this tender act of caring. What do you see when I tell you that this bronze statue is in the Cancer Research Center at the University of Chicago. This work by Artist Britt Wikström is a

wonderful example of how an artist of faith can make God's love present and palpable in today's world. This is GOOD NEWS!

5)⁹ **Lastly, our suffering is not without meaning** for it ultimately leads to resurrection. I see mothers and fathers who have lost a child laugh again – that is resurrection. I know those who have lost much financially find their needs met and come to peace with less – that is resurrection. Did you know that studies have revealed that within two years of the event, there is no difference in the level of happiness between someone who won the lottery and someone who lost a limb in an accident! Again as we look at layers of the onion – in this life here and now we can know life after death – death of a loved one, death of a career, death of a dream – God can give us hope and peace and joy. In Christ, we also know that there is a new life for us beyond this life – that final and glorious resurrection.

¹⁰ Listen to this adapted reading from Isaiah one last time:

53 Who has believed what we have heard?

And to whom has the strength of the Lord been revealed?

² For the Body of Christ grew up like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;

It had no form or majesty that we should take notice,
nothing in its appearance that we should desire to join it.

³ The church is despised and rejected by others;
a place of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their face
it was despised, and we held it of no account.

¹¹ I end with this quote to ponder: love is secured not by economic exchange, but by gift. I don't know much about the evolution theory but the one phrase, "Survival of the fittest" could not be further from the Gospel. God's kingdom is built one hundred percent upon the survival of the community and that means survival of the weakest. Our call to be suffering servants is the key to the kingdom come and God's will being done. The world is full of good people, very good people who do some good things – but that is not the good news. There are so many questions that we need to bring to this text. What would it look like for First Baptist Church to live out selfless service, deferring to one another in such a way that it becomes truly Good News for this community and city of Lethbridge? How might the arm of the Lord be revealed among us, when our passions become our neighbours? What has to change in my life personally if I want to become the good news – I who have a very comfortable, happy and pleasant life? Questions, questions and more questions – O Holy Spirit reveal yourself to us and speak truth into our questions.