

4.5.20 Palm Sunday

Is God with Us in Suffering

Isaiah 50.4-10

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One thing that's not new to the human experience is suffering, it's always been a part of life. Suffering, hardship, pain, grief, and the unspeakable things that human beings sometimes do to other people, sadly have always been part of human history. They've also been part of causing people to question or doubt the existence of God or led others who had faith to stop trusting in and believing in God.

Teresa of Ávila, the sixteenth century mystical writer, knew about suffering. In a difficult moment of her life she was forced to cross a river while sick with fever. She raised her voice of complaint heavenward, *"Lord, amid so many ills this comes on top of all the rest!"* A voice responded, *"This is how I treat my friends."* Teresa retorted, *"Ah, my God! That is why you have so few of them!"*¹ Some may feel it's in the fine print of the Christian contract, but following Jesus is anything but safe, it doesn't promise a life of ease and affluence, of health and wealth. In C.S. Lewis's story *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, there's a description of Aslan, the lion, who is the Christ figure in the story. Mr. Beaver says, *"Safe? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."* Jesus is good but he is also one who suffers, which means even if following him at times isn't safe, we can trust him and rely on him.

I've been thinking about suffering and the Christian life because of the global pandemic and because it's Palm Sunday. Holy Week is upon us and it will be a different Holy Week than any we have experienced, and it's helpful to be reminded that we believe in and follow a God who is intimately acquainted with human suffering. A prophecy of Isaiah asks us, ***"Will you identify yourself with the suffering One?"*** For those of us who haven't suffered that question may cause some hesitation. Others who have endured it, know **that in our suffering we can better identify with what Jesus went through and our pain can help us grow closer to him and grow in**

¹ As told in Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 133.

compassion to those who are suffering. Listen to **Isaiah 50:4-10** and think about the parallels you hear with Jesus' experience.

“The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens— wakens **my ear** to listen as those who are taught. **5 The Lord God has opened my ear,** and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. **6** I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. **7 The Lord God helps me;** therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; **8** he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. **9** It is **the Lord God who helps me;** who will declare me guilty? All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up. **10 Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant, who walks in darkness and has no light, yet trusts in the name of the Lord and relies upon his God?”**

This is the third of what are called the "servant songs" in the book of Isaiah. In Isaiah 50 we see for the first time the depiction of the servant's suffering and affliction. Some people need to give up the false idea that if I believe in God, I will be spared all suffering, trouble, and hardship. This isn't what the Bible teaches. Many faithful and committed people have suffered greatly and even lost their lives including Jesus. Isaiah says the Lord God has been with the servant through all the affliction; teaching him, sustaining him, opening his ears to hear and understand. **Note the things the Lord God has done for the servant and** how they're shown in Jesus' life.

“The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.” Jesus spoke with authority. People enjoyed listening to him. His *mind* was submitted to God and God's will (50:4). Luke (2:52) tells us Jesus grew in wisdom and John says that everything Jesus said and did was taught to Him by His Father (John 5:19, 30; 6:38; 8:28). Jesus prayed to the Father for guidance (John 11:42; Mark 1:35) and meditated on the Word. What God taught the Servant, the Servant shared with those who needed encouragement and help. The Servant sets a good example for all who know the importance of a daily “quiet time” with the Lord. I've

been so happy to hear from many of you as you've been going deeper in God's Word and doing daily reading. Jesus frequently took time alone to pray – sometimes early in the morning, sometimes late at night, occasionally by the shore, other times in the mountains. He tried to hear and follow God's will all the way to the Garden of Gethsemane and the cross.

The Lord God “**has opened my ear**” and the servant listens as those who are taught. The Servant's *will* was yielded to the Lord God. An “opened ear” is one that hears and obeys the voice of the master. It's critically important who and what we listen to because many people get led astray from God and don't even realize it because they listen to false prophets and liars rather than the Lord's servant. Once we hear and are taught God's Word, then it's vital that we follow and obey it. Isaiah 1:19 tells us the people to whom Isaiah ministered were neither “willing” nor “obedient,” but the Servant still did the will of the Lord God. For Jesus this wasn't easy, it meant yielding His body to wicked men who mocked Him, whipped Him, spat on Him, and nailed Him to a cross (Matt. 26:67; 27:26, 30).

Twice, the servant in Isaiah states, “The Lord God helps me.” He says, I've not been disgraced, and no one will declare him guilty. **The Servant did all of this by faith in the Lord God (Isa. 50:7–11).** Jesus was determined to do God's will even if it meant going to a cross (Luke 9:51; John 18:1–11). He knew that the Lord God would help him. Believing God will help us, however, doesn't mean we'll be spared suffering. The Servant was falsely accused, but He knew that God would vindicate Him and eventually put His enemies to shame.

The servant in Isaiah 50 turns his face like a flint to his tormenters, just as Jesus turned his face to go to Jerusalem (Luke 9:50). In the book of Isaiah, the nation of Judah is defined by its rebellion against God (see Isaiah 1), the servant is defined by his obedience. He did not turn backward. He moved forward with confidence in God, his sustainer and teacher and Jesus did the same. Like Teresa of Ávila, however, the servant was not spared suffering. He's no Daniel sleeping comfortably on a lion's mane. The servant enters deeply into the river of suffering. The servant does this because of

his confidence in the vindication of God. Accusers and tormenters may abound. Nevertheless, the servant places his hopes and trust in God alone as does Christ.

The picture of Jesus in John's gospel reflects the force of this third servant song from Isaiah. Jesus moves to the cross in the confident assurance of his Father. The Father's teaching has instructed and sustained Jesus as we hear in **John 12:27-28**, *"And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name."* When Jesus knew that all had been accomplished, he cried out, *"It is finished"* and bowed his head and gave up his spirit (John 19:30). The picture is of Jesus, God's servant, confident in the will of his Father for the redemption of the world and in the hope of his vindication.

Isaiah 50:10 asks an important question: ***"Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant?"*** This third servant song sounds like the experience of Jesus. But the final question is a difficult one. **Who will obey and identify themselves with this suffering figure?** That requires some serious reflection. Am I willing to follow Christ and obey him no matter what that might mean? Paul described his goal in life in Philippians 3:10-11, *"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead."* What about us? I've been thinking about the poor souls who are dying alone with no family present to comfort them. I believe there is still at least some comfort for those who trust and believe that Christ is present with them in their suffering even at the time of their death.

On Palm Sunday we're invited once again to reconsider and reorient the way we think about our own humanity. How do I define myself as a person? Who is my leader? Who am I following? Who am I praising? During Holy Week, the prophet Isaiah, encourages us to identify with Jesus Christ, the suffering servant savior. Following Jesus isn't safe. But we can be assured the one we follow is worthy of our devotion and we can trust and rely on him, even when life is at its most challenging. A friend wrote the following about trusting God in life's toughest moments:

“Trusting God... is sometimes walking in the dark or even being still in the dark... when it feels like hope is distant. Dark is loud and holds us tightly... trusting God is doing what we can to take care of ourselves even when we don't care... and we are too tired. Trusting God is opening our hand just enough that God can take hold, like a child would when afraid and not letting go. Trusting God is taking a risk and sharing our pain with someone... letting it out. Trusting God is seeking his presence every day, whether the darkness seems to get brighter, or not. Trusting God is gratitude for the rain. Trusting God is saying aloud, “He is with me”. Trusting God is opening up the blinds or shades and letting the day begin. Trusting God is trusting your caretakers, doctors, therapists, trusting God is acting even when you want to throw the blankets over your head and stay in bed. Trusting God is taking a risk... and allowing yourself to feel. God can help you with all those feelings. Trusting God is a daily choice.”

“Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant, who walks in darkness and has no light, yet trusts in the name of the Lord and relies upon his God?” Can we walk in the darkness of an uncertain present and unknown future trusting the Lord and relying on God? **“Never doubt in the dark what God has told you in the light.”** In his wonderful book, *The Gift of Peace*, the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin reflected on his life goal, which was a prayer to God– **“to let go of self and trust in you.”** This is precisely what Jesus did and what we're called to do. The central event that creates, nourishes, and matures our community of faith is an act of humble, obedient service by Jesus. God sent Jesus, the gift of love, to earth in a lowly and humble way. He was born in a manger and grew up like every child. On Palm Sunday, Jesus came humbly and courageously into Jerusalem willing to suffer, trusting in and relying upon the Lord God, offering to those who would receive him: **Love stronger than death, Forgiveness greater than our sin, and Peace in our pain and suffering.** Let's pray through this week that we may share in Christ's suffering, dying and rising.

Prayer Almighty God, in your tender love towards us you sent your Son to take our nature upon him, and to suffer death upon the cross; grant that we may follow the example of his great humility and share in his glorious resurrection: through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.