

Recognizing the Servant

Isaiah 53:1-6

December 3, 2017

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As Pastor John Song said last week we are beginning this Advent season, and throughout the Advent season we are working through the servant songs in Isaiah. If you're new to us or this is your first time visiting you might wonder why are we in Isaiah and not in some of the birth narratives of the Gospels. Because one of the reasons is we wanted to transition from completing and finishing the Gospel of Mark [to] looking at Advent as it should be seen. And that is, *Advent* means waiting. We are waiting for the coming of the King. And what more appropriate place could there be then the season of Israel being spoken to by the prophet Isaiah as they were awaiting a king. They were awaiting the return to their former glory.

But Isaiah would declare to them something very different than they would have expected. In fact, this passage this morning in many ways is the magnifying glass on how much they misunderstood, because their expectation was for someone and something very different than what they were hearing. And so during this Advent we're going to be looking at the ways in which the Scriptures themselves proclaimed to a waiting people the coming, the Advent of the King. And the scriptures tell us that Jesus came to serve and not to be served, but to offer himself as a ransom for many. This is the servant song, Isaiah 53:1-6.

- ¹ Who has believed what he has heard from us?
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,
and no beauty that we should desire him.
- ³ He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.
- ⁴ Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
- ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.
- ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.) Please pray with me. Come, Holy Spirit, and open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in this your word. As a treasure not yet found, may our hearts and our minds be fixed upon the treasure that is ours in Christ Jesus our

Lord, that we might see the servant, the Lamb of God. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

One of the things that is very true of the American people is that we continue to show a penchant and a love for mystery and slow discovery and the final reveal. We enjoy that. It's seen by the fact that "Undercover Boss," I think, is still on TV. The fact that it's still on television and people haven't figured out when the camera crew shows up to their business that maybe, just maybe, this might be the "Undercover Boss" show—I don't know, but suspension of disbelief, maybe.

But when that show first came on and I watched an episode or two, it was an intriguing idea. The boss comes in completely in a ridiculously obvious costume, but OK, fine. But doesn't look like you expect the C.E.O. to look like, doing things you would not expect the C.E.O. to do, asking questions that the C.E.O. probably should know, but doesn't. And of course there's the slow transformation throughout the show, and they do the little vignettes. The boss, of course, is like, wow, I never knew, I never knew people did these kinds of things—the devotion, the care. And, of course, he's transformed or she is transformed in the process, and at the end, of course, that bumbling employee that was joined to your team is suddenly the C.E.O.. And you know, it's...We love it! And then, of course, what we really love is the fact that at the end, you know, the people who they've highlighted throughout the show, the C.E.O. says hey, you know, I had no idea how hard you were working. I had no idea the sacrifice you were giving to make this company a lot better. And a gift is given, maybe a scholarship, maybe a mortgage payment, whatever the case may be. And it is, it's a good story to tell.

It's because there's something in us that recognizes we don't always see, we don't always recognize. And then in the reveal we hope that it's to our benefit. The good news this morning is the reveal of this passage is to us good news. But it's only good news because it's in the context of really bad news. This is about recognizing the servant, when nobody wants to recognize him as a servant.

Let's look together in these six verses. And what you will see in these six verses, you see in the outline: **The Diagnosis of the Human Condition**, verses 1-3, and **The Healing Power of Divine Will**, verses 4-6.

First, **The Diagnosis of the Human Condition**. Beginning, of course, in verses 1-3, the first thing we see here in this diagnosis of the human condition is this. It requires that the servant is revealed to us, not because we have discovered it on our own. It has to be revealed. This is the point that Isaiah is trying to bring home. Verse 1: "Who has believed what he has heard from us?" It's a rhetorical question. No one has believed it. Israel is completely rejecting the message of Isaiah. They want to hear of a conquering king come to remake the glory of Israel. Who has heard it? Oh, they've heard it, but they've not understood it. They've not recognized it. So the diagnosis of our natural ability as human beings to see that which we most need is not good. It is not good news at all. The answer could be screaming out to us. It can be right in front of us and we're completely blind to it.

He goes further in the second part of verse 1. "And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" The arm of the Lord in the Old Testament means how has the Lord demonstrated or shown his strength. But in these verses, because it is associated with the servant, to whom—not is the arm of the Lord revealed. No, to whom has the Lord himself been revealed? No one

has understood what has been said, and because of that no one can see the Lord for whom he really is. It requires revelation. Special revelation. Particular revelation. Not natural logic or reason or understanding or intelligence or background or pedigree. It requires the Lord to open up the mind of our hearts, the love of our hearts. It requires the Lord to remove our blindness and to show to us: This is my Son.

So the bad news is none of us are sitting here this morning by our own wisdom, instinct, or intelligence. And this is both the burden of those who preach and everyone who tells of the Gospel, but also the freedom. The burden is I can preach these sermons—and I have heard sermons preached so much better than my own—and we can sit in a pew for twenty years and have the Gospel preached every week, and yet never really understand it. I've seen people come to the Lord after being members of a church for twenty plus years and yet never really understood. They could mouth it, but they never understood. I can preach this and recognize that people can say, "Good sermon, Pastor," and yet that is not helpful in the sense that that means that people understood it.

But there is a freedom. The freedom is it's not my job to convince you of its truth. I can't depend on my wisdom or my gifts or my intelligence or even my own preparation to bring people to a place of recognizing who Christ is. That's a freedom, a freedom to give myself to the preparation, a freedom to come before you and be as a fool for Christ that I might win some. Because it is dependent only on the Holy Spirit's revelation. Because I once heard the Gospel, yet did not understand. And then suddenly I was on my knees praying, Lord have mercy upon me, for I am a sinner. It did not come and it will not come except by revelation. Who has heard it? To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? It must require the Lord.

You also see in verse 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, and no beauty that we should desire him." Verse 2. Grew up before the Lord himself. He is going to come as a child. It's already there in what Isaiah is prophesying. But it is saying it will come out of an unexpected way. A root out of dry ground? That doesn't make sense. In other words it's going to come out of an unexpected place. It's going to come out of hard ground, but it will come up nonetheless.

But then these words, that are only used really in many ways to talk about Rachel back in Genesis. He will not have majesty or beauty. The idea is it will be easy and it is easy for human beings to look on Jesus Christ and do what? Simply on the basis of what he looks like, to reject him. That is both a truth but also an indictment of very bad news. We do judge books by their covers. As we've heard it said: That person has a radio face. A really beautiful voice, but let's keep it behind the microphone and out from in front of the camera. This is precisely what people thought of Jesus. It isn't just that he was marred or scarred in some way. It's that he was from a place and had a presence and a persona that none of us would be gravitating towards. It is easy to isolate and to shun Jesus as human beings

But then verse 3. "He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief, and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not." What's interesting is this. You see the play that Isaiah is doing. There is 'he,' meaning Jesus who is on his own, and the many that are 'we.' So he is despised by the many. It is one against the many.

But how does it describe this Jesus, this servant? He says he would be “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” But the words used there that are translated ‘sorrows’ and ‘acquainted with grief’ are not talking about that Jesus was just—or that the servant would be a killjoy or an overly morose personality or temperament. Rather it describes that he is one who understands he's not afraid to take on weakness or to be seen or recognized as weak. That's different than actually being weak. Because we know that the New Testament declares when I am weak then I am strong. So what is being said here is that the servant would be one who would gladly take on weakness. But gladly also ‘acquainted with grief.’ That is a relational component, meaning he would be one who would be associated with those who are grieving. He is acquainted with the broken. This is not about his temperament This is about his character. This is about what kind of person he is.

But then it says these words. How do the many respond? The many respond by despising and rejecting. Isolating. But then these final four words: “We esteemed him not.” In Hebrew the word ‘esteemed,’ it is a word used in accounting, meaning to judge value. And that as the servant comes there will be an inescapable value laid upon him that everybody will make. And they will simply, as an accountant does, simply look at in the say does this have value or not? And the simple idea is that humans who come into acquaintance with the servant as he is revealed, the first response is: Not worth my time. We esteemed him not.

The story in context, the bad news that is being described here, is summarized by one of the greatest commentators on Isaiah, Alec Motyer. In his commentary he says this. To see the servant and find no beauty in him reveals the bankruptcy of human emotions. To be one who is with those who despise and then reject him exposes the misguidedness of human will. To appraise him and conclude that he is nothing condemns our minds as corrupted and participants in sin. Thus every aspect of human nature is inadequate. Every avenue along which by nature we might arrive at the truth and respond to God—those avenues are closed. Nothing but divine revelation can make the servant known to us and draw us to him.

The universal response to Jesus, to the servant, is the universal diagnosis of the human condition. We do not want to see. We do not understand. And when presented with the evidence we reject, despise, and value based on worldly terms. This is the diagnosis.

But here is the good news: **The Healing Power of Divine Will.** The Healing Power of Divine Will. We see it in verse 4. “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.” In the second half, the second group of three verses, Isaiah is going to begin the process of doing these stark comparisons. He and we. He and we.

And if we begin in verse 4, we begin to see the first part of the healing power of divine will. After what has just been said about the diagnosis of human condition, God is within his rights to pour out his wrath on all who reject and [de]value his Son and his servant that he will send. We deserve that judgment. We deserve that wrath. Yet God's divine will is not to pour out that judgment and wrath, but rather to send forth this servant. And how does it describe [him]? He, it says, has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.

And then when it says we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted—again what begins to happen as you hear, you can hear it in the words, the distance. What is happening to

the servant, what is happening in the 'we' is this. He is increasingly being secluded, and what is weighting him down—weighing him down, rather, is our grief, our sorrows, our brokenness. While increasingly being secluded, he is taking on himself what belongs to us. We are secluding him and going the opposite direction and saying he is of no value. That word 'esteemed' again. He has been loaded down with our weight, the weight of our sin, and yet we consider him not worth our time. Hmm.

As I read these words in Isaiah I was drawn to confession. That out of response to the condition of human nature, God's first answer: Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. I was led to this confession. The author writes, Oh Lord, our God, help us and heal us. We are stubborn blind people who repeatedly and willfully stray away from you. Like children who don't want their parents to hold their hands while walking through a dangerous city, we will not stay near you. In our blindness even our ability to confess has been distorted. Some of us are emotionally unaffected by the fact that we are helpless sinners without your mercy, indifferent to the cost of our rebellion. We speak words of confession out of principle, out of duty, or out of habit, but rarely out of a deep awareness of our need of helpless state.

This is the picture. That while we increasingly stray, he is taking on himself that which belongs to us. Oh, what a savior! What a servant. A servant who continues to serve even while those whom he serves reject him.

Verse 5. "But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed." Do you see the contrast? The 'he' and the 'we.' This verse, this verse, ladies and gentlemen, if you are ever to memorize a verse as a Christian, it is this one. This is the Gospel. It is the perspective on the Gospel that is so much bigger than even this verse, but in this verse it shows that the servant would be wounded because of our transgressions. He would receive judgment for our sins. He would receive wrath and discipline. But we—as a result of his doing that—we have received peace and reconciliation with our Heavenly Father. He would be wounded, but we can be healed.

Now the healing here, the healing that we sang this morning, is a healing that is different than physical ailments. While we are called to ask for physical healing—that is right and good—but the woundedness, the healing that is being spoken of here is the wound deep at the center of our human nature and our fallen condition. "By his wounds we are healed." That is speaking of the beautiful union that is Christ was given for our sins, we are forgiven. We are reconciled.

But more than that, ladies and gentlemen, oh hear that the gift of Christmas, the gift of the servant, the coming advent of the servant King, did not come merely, merely to wash us of our sin, but to make us a new people. If you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, when we sing, "Heal us," we sing as those who are united and reconciled to our Heavenly Father. We are with him as a brother. We receive the blessings and benefits of being united to the perfect offering for our sins. Therefore we do not crawl back to the throne of grace. We can boldly come before the throne of grace. We do not lash ourselves and make ourselves feel guilty so therefore we can come to God. No. Christ has paid it all, which means we come—Lord, have mercy. Forgive me. We haven't just been forgiven, we've been called by a new name. You are now called a child—beloved, dear child of God

Dear Christian, and those who are not yet Christians, I say to you, nothing in our hands we bring, but simply to thy cross I cling. But even more so than that hymn can say, it is because the servant came and clings to us. He took on our transgressions, our iniquities, so that we can be healed. You have been declared righteous. Righteous, because of the servant, before a holy God. Can I get an Amen? Amen. I think we need to sing that song again.

But finally, I would say verse 6. "We all like sheep have gone astray; we have turned--every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." Again, that 'we' and 'he' comparison. We stray; he is faithful. We reject; he took on our sin. We love ourselves; the servant gave of himself. Do you see that there? We all like sheep of gone astray. We stray. We have turned everyone to his own way. Ah, but the Lord—he has taken on our iniquity. He has given himself. This is the Good News. This is the healing power of divine will. In the context of very bad news, we received the servant.

I finish with these words, again from that confession. The writer transitions: Yet Christ has recognized our helpless estate. He has shed his own blood for our souls. This blood that speaks righteousness for us gives us confidence to confess our failures to you today. Where we have failed to approach you with honest, sincere, and confident words, Christ stands in our place, laying before you his heart in truth and passion, with no sin or mixed motives. As he hung on the cross, tortured for our iniquities, the sorrows that were rightfully ours were given to him in fullest measure. Your steadfast love surrounds us, because your steadfast love was taken away from him. What a precious, atoning, ransoming love.

What a precious, atoning, ransoming love. He was crushed; we are healed. This is what it means to recognize the servant, for the servant is the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. Oh, what a savior. What a salvation. What a grace. And may I say to you, Columbia Presbyterian Church, may we be the loudest singing, hootin' hollering, celebrating people, because this is the grace that is given to you.

Let's pray. Holy Spirit, fall fresh upon us, that we would be a people that rejoices that we now see because of your revelation. We now see the servant for who he is, the Lamb of God who has come to take away the sins of the world. For Christ as the servant King came to serve and not be served, but to offer his life as a ransom for many. Oh, what a savior. What a beautiful grace. Now we ask you, oh Lord, by your Holy Spirit may we recognize the servant as the Lamb of God. And may we be a people of rejoicing and celebration, for oh, what a grace you have given to us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.