



## Emmaus Road: The Suffering Servant

Isaiah 53:1-9

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Again, good morning. Through the continuing challenges of COVID, which make it difficult for us to gather without putting the health of one another and the greater community at risk, I am always grateful for this opportunity to join with you on Sunday mornings here at WSUMC.LIVE. Though recording these services in this empty room is definitely not the same as having you all gathered here together, I am grateful that we are able to stay connected through calls, texts, zooms, and the chat here on Sunday mornings.

We are continuing this morning with our focus on the conversation of Jesus with the disciples on the Road to Emmaus. Luke's gospel tells us Jesus joined these two disciples in his resurrected form, though they were kept from recognizing him. Questioning the person of Jesus as the one to fulfill the prophecies of a coming Messiah, these disciples seemed disappointed at Jesus' death, and were distraught that his body had gone missing from the grave. Jesus then tells them all about who Jesus is as the Messiah using the sacred Hebrew scriptures, from Moses through all the prophets.

We've looked at Malachi, Zechariah, Micah, Nathan, and today we're looking back to Isaiah. I'm curious though, as we pick up with Isaiah this morning, have you ever wondered what Jesus said to the disciples as they journeyed down the Emmaus Road? Are there other texts, outside the ones I've used the past few weeks, that you think Jesus might have used in his walking explanation? If so, please share your thoughts in the chat. What do you think Jesus had to say?

Our text here in Isaiah 53 comes in the midst of the Babylonian exile. The people of Israel have been removed from their homeland, taken away from the place promised them by God, a removal that is due to their own iniquities. The prophets, at minimum, make it clear that this hardship of exile is due to their own failure of faithfulness.

In the midst of this exilic period, Isaiah proclaims the promise of God that, though the exile may last longer than desired, God will not abandon the people of faith. God will remain steadfast to the covenant, and will see the people Israel return to the promised land.

As a part of this promise – in response to God's faithfulness to the covenant – we find in Isaiah four poetic accounts of the one God promises to use in delivering Israel from her suffering. In Isaiah 42, 49, 50, and here in 52/53, we find what are traditionally called the Servant Songs.

These poetic accounts offer a promise of how it is God mitigates the sinfulness of humanity without having to continue to bring about atonement through acts such as the exile. The songs promise one to

come who will be so focused on God's will, "that he [will take] the consequence of the sin of the community upon himself, even though he was innocent of any wrong."<sup>1</sup>

The significance of these promises are cosmic in nature. Listen to what Isaiah promises will come about because of the servant. Beginning in verse 4, we read, "He has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But 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."

At the center of the story of God, is this question of, what can heal my creation? What can restore the perfection that once was in the beginning? There had been many prior attempts to set up a structure such that, as God's people failed in their faithfulness, they might atone for their sin. There were rules around burnt offerings, there were invitations to offer the first fruit of one's labor, there were instructions around offering young livestock, Abraham was invited to evidence his faithfulness through the offering of his first born. God had sought to invite the people to alleviate their own lack of faith, and when they failed, God tried in drastic ways to rid them of their debauchery. From the flood to the exiles, God had made it known, there was but one way to please the Creator, and that was for God's created to be as faithful to the covenant as God would be.

Having had the created fail time and again, God sought a new way; God promised a new covenant through which our sin would be forgiven, our brokenness repaired, our infirmities healed at no ask of us. Upon the shoulders of this servant, freedom from the powers and weight of sin and death would be made available to all, not because of what we would do, but because of the faithfulness of the servant.

This is good news, for the promise of the prophet is not that we *shall* be saved some day in the future, but that we *are* saved because of the faithfulness of the servant. In the broader context of Christianity, we often put far too much weight on the question, "are you saved?" For even before Christ was born, the promise of salvation had already been made known by the prophet Isaiah. Upon the shoulders of this one, upon his oppression, shall rest our freedom. Upon his suffering shall rest our salvation.

Why do we think we are still waiting for such freedom? What do we think we have to do to earn such liberation? The text makes it clear, it has been bought and paid for through the humility and faithfulness of the servant. What are we trying to prove?

Unless, that is, unless we don't think Christ is the fulfillment of this prophecy. And then, this question of "who is the servant?", well it's a right good question for us to ask and ponder. For if we are unconvinced it is Jesus, then perhaps we are still waiting for the promise of our salvation.

Admittedly, there is no universal agreement as to who the servant of the Servant Songs really is. Generally speaking, if you were to ask most any Christian, you'd likely be told the text is referring to Jesus. I mean, this text from Isaiah is set as the lectionary text for Good Friday, the day on which we remember the suffering passion of Christ. Like, it's clearly talking about Jesus, right? ... But, on that road to Emmaus, Jesus wasn't talking with Christians, he was talking with Jews. We are privy to

information they were not. So, how would Jesus use this text to help those disciples on the Emmaus road understand his identity as the Messiah, or the Servant, using this text?

Let's consider what the text says about the one who will be the servant.

Beginning in verse 2, we read, "He grew up like a young plant, like a root out of dry ground." This may not be a direct connection to Isaiah 11, which says, "A shoot shall come out of the root of Jesse," but for the faithful of the Jews who knew the Hebrew Scriptures and were awaiting the coming of the Messiah, the connection would be hard to miss. One is to come who will be a new beginning, and, making plain this connection to Isaiah, shall come like a root from the line of David – something we discussed a few weeks ago.

Isaiah continues, "He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him."

I don't know about you, but these are fightin' words. This seems like a cruel and unusual way to demean someone's appearance. "He had nothing in his appearance that we should desire him?" Burn! ... and yet, these words fit Jesus. He was born of a relatively poor family; said to have been born in a room with animals. There was nothing about him that fit the narrative of the people's vision for a king. He didn't fit the bill for the stately warrior they expected to offer their salvation.

Again, Isaiah continues, "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."

It is true, Jesus had a following. It's said that thousands gathered to hear him preach and were fed by his miracles in and around Galilee. In this way, it's hard to say that everyone who saw him hid their face from him. And yet, after that entrance into Jerusalem, it seems that those who followed him were found lacking in their support. Even Peter, a beloved disciple, denied his association with Jesus on the night Jesus was tried in the court of public opinion. Jesus was despised by others, he did suffer because even those who loved him failed to show up for him. They literally hid, having gone to an upper room in fear for their own safety. They held no account of him, including these two disciples on the Emmaus Road who seem to have lost hope in Jesus.

If we skip down to verse 7, Isaiah continues, "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; ... by a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? ... 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."

In the midst of his trial, Jesus didn't rebuke the crowd. Standing on trial, he named no lie, nor did he struggle or fight for his freedom. He went to the cross, and the only plea he made was for God's forgiveness to befall those who had tortured and crucified him. He had done no violence, spoken nothing but the truth, and yet he received the punishment of a heinous and treasonous criminal.

It seems an easy argument to make for Jesus, that this text of the Servant Song was speaking directly of him. And perhaps that argument would have found a welcome ear in the disciples on the Emmaus Road. They feared Christ had given up, that his death and the empty grave showed signs of a weakness that did not define the divine. Yet, what we find in Jesus as the servant is not a weakness, but a sign of complete faithfulness. “The Servant did not submit to affliction through pathetic resignation but as a bold choice to participate with God in an act aimed at breaking the stranglehold that sin had maintained for countless ages over the human family.”<sup>ii</sup>

Professor Paul Hanson offers, “The Servant was not a pawn in the hands of an arbitrary god but one who had committed himself freely to a deliberate course of action.”<sup>iii</sup> He continues, “By bearing the sin of others and pouring himself out to death, the Servant has become the human vehicle through whom those others are healed.”<sup>iv</sup>

This argument for Jesus as the Suffering Servant is not only easy to make, it’s stood the test of time among the Christian community. But as I close, I want to consider a Jewish perspective. Again, Jesus was Jewish, speaking to other Jews, and there is a reason many Jews today do not believe this text to be pointing toward Jesus.

One of the primary reasons is due to a view of this text that was first offered by Jewish commentator Rashi, who lived just a thousand years after Jesus. “Rashi held the position that the servant passages of Isaiah referred to the collective face of the nation Israel rather than a personal Messiah.”<sup>v</sup> Others have argued that, should this text be speaking of a specific individual, how could it be Jesus, for the peace and justice promised in the wake of the Messiah are still missing in the world today.<sup>vi</sup>

I’d like to offer a both / and perspective.

I think the text is speaking of Jesus as the personal Messiah. It’s hard for me, given what I know about the full breadth of our Biblical text, to not see the connection between Jesus and the suffering servant. **And**, and I’m not sure the text isn’t *also* speaking of the suffering servant as the collective body of God’s created. As Christ ascended, God breathed into existence what we call the Church, what is also defined as “the body of Christ.” I realize it’s been a while, but this is our prayer at the table of the Lord when we gather for communion, “Make these gifts be for us the body and blood of Christ that we may be for the world the body of Christ redeemed by his blood.”

Again, Paul Hanson offers, “God’s will is done where a human being regardless of his or her standing in the eyes of the powerful, finds the highest expression of human dignity in expressing solidarity with fellow human beings through a love that acknowledges no bounds because its source is in God.”<sup>vii</sup> If we are to be the physical presence of Christ for the world today, should we not *also* be a living witness to the suffering servant that is our redeemer and Lord? And is that perhaps why we don’t see peace and justice in the world today, as one would expect following the work of Christ, because we, God’s people have not yet lived into our full call as the body of Christ?

As Jesus walked that road with the disciples, I can only imagine he not only used this text to identify himself as the suffering servant, but that he too would have invited the disciples on that road to

consider how they might heed God’s call for the faithful to see themselves as freed from the powers of empires, from the chains of self-preservation, and from the doubt of evil that says we must be more to be worthy. The promise of the text is that through the work of the suffering servant, we are made worthy ... we have been freed from all iniquities ... we are made whole from our brokenness. We are not waiting for it, we have been redeemed in the glory of God.

May we have ears to hear and hearts to receive as we walk this road with Christ, that we might be freed from the powers that hold us down to claim our rightful place in the empowered, glorified, saved, and suffering servant that is the body of Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Paul D. Hanson. *Isaiah 40-66: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Efraim Goldstein. “Who’s the Subject of Isaiah 53? You Decide!” April 20, 2018. [jewsforjesus.org](http://jewsforjesus.org). Retrieved February 4, 2021.

<sup>vi</sup> Hanson.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.