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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/17/2010, Midweek Lent 4
The Fourth Song of the Servant, Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12
Also, Mark 15:15-20
With His Stripes We are Healed

PRAYER OF THE DAY

God of all mercy, by your power to heal and to forgive, graciously cleanse us from all sin and make us strong; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen

INTRODUCTION

This evening's Bible Reading is known as "The Fourth Song of the Servant." It comes from the end of Isaiah 52 and the whole of Isaiah 53. Before I read it aloud for us, let me make a few comments about this reading, seeking to put it in some perspective within the whole book of Isaiah.

The book of Isaiah is a long and wonderful book, filled with stirring passages from beginning to end. All told, it is sixty-six chapters long, which makes it the second longest book in the Bible, after the Psalms. Our reading this evening comes from a portion of Isaiah that stretches from Chapter Forty through Chapter Fifty-five. This is a section of the book that speaks of a Persian king named Cyrus. In speaking of Cyrus, the Bible, then, invites us to consider a particular historical context for these chapters 40-55. It is the context of approaching salvation. It is the context of comfort for the Israelites long held in Babylonian captivity. This part of the book is joyful in encouraging the exiles to believe that soon Cyrus will defeat the Babylonian Empire and release the Israelite captives and let them go back home, which is a sweet hope indeed.

Beginning in Chapter 40, Isaiah understands that his job now is to comfort Israel and proclaim to Israel that she is meant to be a blessing for the nations, which means, for the whole world. Chapter 40 starts off with these great words:

¹Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. (Isaiah 40:1-2, RSV)

Throughout these chapters 40-55, Isaiah speaks of a new Exodus for the people of Israel. Something wonderful is afoot. Even God's creation will participate in it:

Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a

plain. ⁵And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

But amidst all this good news, there are these haunting passages concerning the “servant of the Lord.” There, we find that not everything is happy, not everything is without suffering.

In the First Song, we learn that the Servant has been given God’s Spirit and his purpose is to bring justice and truth, not only to Israel, but to the whole earth:

¹Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations. ²He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; ³a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. ⁴He will not fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law. (Isaiah 42:1-4, RSV)

Now, in this evening’s reading, we will see that the ministry of this Servant comes at a cost, a terribly high cost.

The identity of this Servant has long been debated. One of the most ancient ideas is that the Servant refers to Israel as a whole. But this does not seem to work because, first off, the Servant addresses Israel in such a way as to distinguish the Servant from Israel. But the chief problem with identifying the Servant with Israel is that the suffering of the Servant is innocent, while Israel suffers fair and square for her sins. Also, the Servant has been identified as Moses or Jeremiah or even as Isaiah himself, the author of the Servant Songs. Somehow, none of these ideas seem to work. The Servant seems to be no particular person in Israel’s past or present, but rather a future person.

The Church can hardly keep herself from thinking of Jesus when we hear these Songs of the Servant.

Here, then, is the Fourth Song. It is in the form of a dialogue beginning with the Lord, then with the people, and then the Lord again.

THE FOURTH SONG OF THE SERVANT.....Isaiah 52:13-53:12, RSV

The LORD utters a prophecy concerning his servant. (Isaiah 52:13-15)

¹³Behold, my servant shall prosper, he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high. ¹⁴As many were astonished at him -- his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the sons of men -- ¹⁵so shall he startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which has not been told them they shall see, and that which they have not heard they shall understand.

The kings or the people respond, describing the suffering of the servant and admitting that they little understood it. (Isaiah 53:1-10)

^{53:1}Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? ²For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. ³He 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. ⁴Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed. ⁶All 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. ⁷He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth. ⁸By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? ⁹And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. ¹⁰Yet it was the will of the LORD to bruise him; he has put him to grief; when he makes himself an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand;

The Lord proclaims triumph for the servant. (Isaiah 53:11-12)

¹¹he shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous; and he shall bear their iniquities. ¹²Therefore I will divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out his soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

HOLY GOSPEL Mark 15:15-20, KJV

¹⁵And so Pilate, willing to content the people, released Barabbas unto them, and delivered Jesus, when he had scourged him, to be crucified. ¹⁶And the soldiers led him away into the hall, called Praetorium; and they call together the whole band. ¹⁷And they clothed him with purple, and platted a crown of thorns, and put it about his head, ¹⁸And began to salute him, Hail, King of the Jews! ¹⁹And they smote him on the head with a reed, and did spit upon him, and bowing their knees worshipped him. ²⁰And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple from him, and put his own clothes on him, and led him out to crucify him.

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and *with his stripes we are healed*. (Isaiah 53:4-5, RSV)

The Church has long cherished Isaiah's Fourth Song of the Servant for its ability to illumine the inner meaning of Christ's passion. It would be possible, I suppose, to read the story of Christ in Gethsemane, his arrest, his trial, his sufferings, and his death and to fail to understand that these things concern *us*, you and me.

Imagine an absolute newcomer to earth, say a visitor from some far-off planet. Picture him learning our human language and then turning to the Bible to read the Holy Gospel concerning Jesus. He reads of all these sorrows happening to Jesus, and perhaps concludes that earth can be a hard place, but apart from some interpretation of the *meaning* of these things, our dear newcomer might never understand that this death on bloody Golgotha is a death that concerns every sinner on the face of our earth and gives us all some hope in life. Well, that is why we love Isaiah. His preaching concerning the Servant of the Lord, written six hundred years before Jesus, provides wonderful, stunning insight to what was afoot in the Passion of Our Lord Jesus.

Indeed, Martin Luther praises Isaiah as being one of the chief Evangelists. In a sermon on this evening's text, Luther says this:

The prophet describes the suffering of the Lord almost more clearly than the Evangelists in the New Testament. In the entire Scripture of the Old Testament there is no place where the purpose of Christ's suffering is so precisely and clearly delineated as in this text.¹

My aim in this sermon is to focus on Isaiah's theme that "with his stripes, we are healed." (Isaiah 53:5, RSV) The word "stripes" refers to bruises, wounds, blows, and the furrows in the flesh caused by scourging, all of which Jesus suffered. It is said that Roman scourging was so violent and awful that sometimes it killed all by itself. Jesus, still a young man, survived that cruel whipping, only to face other torments after that, all the way through crucifixion. So, those are the bodily sufferings of Jesus.

But I think we should also include in that word "stripes" the spiritual and human sufferings Jesus bore. He was abandoned by his friends. If such a thing has befallen you at some time in life, you know it is a heavy burden. In Gethsemane,

¹ *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, Volume 5, "Luther's House Postils, Fifth Sermon for Holy Week (Baker Books: Grand Rapids, MI, Copyright 2000), pages 440ff.

he was in agony of soul and prayed that he would be spared the cup drawing ever closer to his lips -- the cup of suffering and death. I think he was terrified there in Gethsemane, at least for a while. He was mocked and reviled and spat upon. The misery of his crucifixion was matched by the misery of human contempt for the dying man. Only the holy women at the foot of the cross and St. John the Beloved Disciple provided some solace for Jesus in the midst of the many stripes breaking upon him and taking away his life.

Isaiah says those awful stripes were for our benefit. "With his stripes *we* are healed." There is medical imagery here. "...we are healed"! The text supposes that we are sick or injured, and that the stripes pounded into Jesus are the means for our healing. This is a rich teaching, and I want to rejoice in it according to three ideas:

- 1) Our Maker is willing to conceive our sin as sickness rather than as an act of war against him -- at least for now. This is an idea I got from the 19th century Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon². He mentions it just in passing, but I am struck by it and want to linger with it a bit.
- 2) Sin is in fact a kind of sickness for us. It might feel great at the moment, but it in fact injures us.
- 3) Our Maker wills that none of us should perish from this sickness and has made a way of escape for us: with his stripes we are healed.

First, our Lord, in his mercy, is willing to count sin as sickness rather than as war. You have heard the saying, "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." It is a saying with much truth in it, as we have seen in Hitler, Stalin, and many a tyrant. And in the story of our Lord's Passion, it seems the slightest challenge to the power of Rome is met with death, cruel death on a cross.

Yet this is not the way of our Maker, for he indeed has absolute power, but it does not corrupt him. Indeed, our Lord's power is matched in every degree by his goodness and his mercy.

Our Maker's mercy is taught throughout the Bible. It is on remarkable display right in the opening chapters of Genesis, for does not the Lord speak of death as the reward of disobedience:

¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: ¹⁷But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely *die*. (Genesis 2:16-17, KJV)

Yet, when Adam and Eve fall into sin by eating of that forbidden tree, the Lord does not kill them. He does not interpret their disobedience as rebellion against

² "Healing By The Stripes of Jesus," Sermon No. 2000, A Sermon Intended for Reading on Lord's-Day, January 1st, 1888

him or as an act of war which he must meet with force. Rather, the Lord seems to interpret their sin as some condition from which they can be saved if they are willing. And so, the Lord puts in play a promise of salvation, an early form of the Gospel in which he declares to the serpent that someday a descendent of poor Adam and Eve will crush his head. That is, the Lord conceives the sin of Adam and Eve as being a malady from which they could be saved.

I quickly mention two other passages in the Bible which speak quite firmly of death, yet the Lord does not quite kill. From the Old Testament, we have that importance passage from Ezekiel about individual responsibility for sin. Here, the Lord teaches that the child shall not suffer for the sins of the father, nor the father for the sins of the child:

²⁰The soul that sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself. (Ezekiel 18:20, RSV)

And from the New Testament, we have that short saying about the wages of sin. St. Paul says this:

²³For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 6:23, KJV)

In the school of tyrants, the strong are taught to quickly smite down those who disobey, yet you and I have disobeyed our Maker many times - far too many times - yet here we are still standing. It appears that the Lord does not interpret our sin as war, but rather as a malady from which we can recover if we are willing. And so he grants us time for that.

My second theme is that sin *is* sickness. Often it means both sickness of soul and sickness of body. Sin is suffering for us. Sin is diminishment for us. Sin wrecks and ruins us, as it did to the Prodigal Son, leaving him in poverty and hunger. Sin promises to make us more alive, but, alas, it sneaks life out of us, for sin harms our neighbor and would harm God, and any such attempt to harm others brings us down. It does not simply harm others, but harms us too.

Many a person can testify that they became stronger when they put off their sin. They became healthier, when they tried to walk closer to Christ, for “with his stripes, we are healed.” Christ means to heal us of our sin. He is not content to save us *in* our sin, but, happily, to heal us *of* our sin.

And this brings me to the third point. Our Maker is not willing that any one should perish through sin. Notice the smooth interplay between sin and sickness in one of our Lord’s most famous sayings about his mercy on sinners:

And as he sat at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were sitting with Jesus and his disciples; for there were many who followed

him. ¹⁶And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” ¹⁷And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Mark 2:15-17, RSV)

So it is that Jesus is called the Great Physician of body and soul.”

But consider this: when we first heard that saying about Jesus as a physician calling those who are sick, rather than those who well, did we imagine that this Great Physician would do his ministry of healing without any suffering for himself? Many physicians are able to do so. They can heal without bearing any personal suffering along the way. But not this Great Physician. It is with his *stripes* that we are healed. Apparently, sin is a sickness that takes a terrible toll on the Physician.

Well, we celebrate Holy Week with a sense of awe and gratitude because Jesus was willing to accept that toll for sin onto his own body. He was willing that he should be scourged, mocked, spat upon, and crucified.

But let us not forget that word “healed.” With our Lord’s stripes, we are “healed.” If sin is sickness, our Lord wants us to become well. He wants us to become healthy. He does not want us to linger in sickness. Indeed, he is risen from the dead so that he can walk with us and us with him, and so that he can lead us into health and wholeness of body and soul. Let us seek that health even now. Let us not be content with sin’s sickness, but seek to forsake sin and to become healed, with his stripes and to his glory, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

Our liturgy continues now with LBW Hymn 305, “I Lay My Sins on Jesus.”