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Isaiah 53:4-12, Mark 10:35-45

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>4</sup>Surely he has borne our griefs  
and carried our sorrows; (Isaiah 53:4, RSV)

In the contrast between today's Old Testament Lesson and Gospel Lesson, we move from the heights of divine love to the depths of human vainglory. James and John are the vainglorious ones. They seek seats of glory in Christ's kingdom. Meanwhile, Jesus is the man of love, who seeks not his own glory, but our salvation. Our First Lesson, from Isaiah 53, speaks most beautifully of him.

Let's begin there, with the Isaiah passage. I think we will find encouragement for our souls in what Isaiah says about Jesus.

In Martin Luther's commentary on Isaiah 53, he focuses on the ministry of Christ to carry our sins:

...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 53:5, RSV)

This is indeed a precious teaching, for where would any of us sinners be if Christ had not been willing to be wounded and bruised for our transgressions?

But I note that Isaiah's praise of Christ does not start off with words about our "transgressions" and "iniquities," but rather our "sorrows":

<sup>4</sup>Surely he has borne our griefs  
and carried our sorrows; (Isaiah 53:4, RSV)

This too is part of the ministry of Jesus. It puts us in mind of the many passages in the Gospel stories about the compassion of Jesus for the suffering ones of this world. Let me recall some of those passages for us:

<sup>36</sup>When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them,  
because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a  
shepherd. (Matthew 9:36, RSV)

<sup>14</sup>As he went ashore he saw a great throng; and he had  
compassion on them, and healed their sick. (Matthew 14:14,  
RSV)

<sup>32</sup>Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days, and have nothing to eat; and I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way. (Matthew 15:32, RSV)

<sup>32</sup>Jesus stood still and called [the two blind men], saying, “What do you want me to do for you?” <sup>33</sup>They said to him, “Lord, let our eyes be opened.” <sup>34</sup>Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they regained their sight and followed him. (Matthew 20:32-34, NRSV)

<sup>40</sup>And a leper came to him beseeching him, and kneeling said to him, “If you will, you can make me clean.” <sup>41</sup>Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I will; be clean.” (Mark 1:40, RSV)

Finally, this one:

<sup>12</sup>As he drew near to the gate of the city, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow; and a large crowd from the city was with her. <sup>13</sup>And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, “Do not weep.” (Luke 7:12-13, RSV)

It would be a joy to preach on any one of these stories. I will not do that now, but let me summarize them this way: Jesus pays attention to the sorrows and struggles of this world, and he means to heal them all.

But how could he have done that if he had not remained true to his ministry? When Jesus spoke of his work, and his determination to complete his path, he meant also the sorrows and sicknesses of life -- how he was determined to heal them too:

I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished! (Luke 12:50, RSV)

Love constrained Jesus. Love and pity and compassion on a world with more than enough of its sorrows: love constrained him to fulfill his ministry:

<sup>4</sup>Surely he has borne our griefs  
and carried our sorrows; (Isaiah 53:4, RSV)

The perfection of his sacrifice, and the offering up of his sinless life to his Father on our behalf, meant his resurrection from the dead, so that henceforth, through all eternity, he stands ready to serve as our Saviour.

You who are sick or sorrowful these days: know that Christ accepted the bruises and stripes and cruel nails so that he will have the right to make you perfectly well one day. If you live in poverty and loneliness, with no physician in sight, and no ability to pay for one if you do see one, still you have the Great Physician of body and soul fighting on your side.

But now, let's shift our attention to the matter of sin and transgression — to the theme Martin Luther loves: the suffering of Christ, not because of his sins, for he had none, but for ours, that we might live. Soon – next Sunday - it will be Reformation Sunday. I am in the mood, then, to lift up Luther for you on Isaiah's wonderful saying about Christ:

...he was wounded for our transgressions,  
he was bruised for our iniquities;

Luther would have us treasure this teaching above every good deed that we might do in life. He compares the goodness of Jesus to our little goodness, and urges us to put our trust in the vast goodness of Jesus rather than in ourselves:

As for you, lift up this article and extol it above every law and righteousness and let it be to you a measureless sea over against a little spark. The sea is Christ who has suffered. Your works and your righteousness are the little spark. Therefore beware, as you place your sins on your conscience, that you do not panic, but freely place them on Christ, as this text says, "He has borne our iniquities." We must clearly transfer our sins from ourselves to Christ. If you want to regard your sin as resting on you, such a thought in your heart is not of God but of Satan himself, contrary to Scripture, which by God's will places your sin on Christ. Hence you must say: "I see my sin in Christ, therefore my sin is not mine but another's. I see it in Christ." It is a great thing to say confidently: "My sin is not mine."

Luther, then, speaks in his characteristic way, emphasizing that Christ was wounded and bruised for *our* iniquities:

These words, OUR, US, FOR US, must be written in letters of gold.

Some Bibles have the words of Jesus printed in red. Luther would have these words printed in gold before our minds and our hearts: wounded and bruised for *our* iniquities and by his stripes *we* are healed.

A couple weeks ago I received a phone call from a former member. She lives far away from us now. In her move from New York, she lost a music CD that meant a lot to her – a CD by blues singer Natalie Douglas, who once sang for us here at Immanuel. I had sent her another copy of that CD and she phoned to thank me. It was a comforting CD for her especially because of one song: “His Eye Is On The Sparrow.” Indeed, it is! Our heavenly Father’s eye is even on the little sparrow. We might be weak, small, sinful, and overlooked in the world, but His eye is on the sparrow.

It is as Isaiah said long ago:

<sup>4</sup>Surely he has borne our griefs  
and carried our sorrows; (Isaiah 53:4, RSV)

That is the kind of Jesus Christ we have: He is good toward us, willing to carry our sorrows and our sins, willing to be last and least of all that you and might be first.

Now let’s turn to the vainglorious ones, James and John.

<sup>37</sup>And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” (Mark 10:37, RSV)

Strange to say, but even Jesus – this world’s Master Teacher -- seems to have trouble teaching his disciples. He has a small classroom, just twelve disciples. He speaks to them plainly, without parables. His teaching must have been sweet to their ears and tugged on their hearts, and yet his disciples are slow to comprehend.

After his Transfiguration on the holy mountain and his healing of the poor boy at the foot of the mountain, Jesus had pretty much withdrawn from the public eye in order to focus on his disciples. St. Mark puts it this way:

<sup>30</sup>They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he would not have any one know it; <sup>31</sup>for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of man will be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him; and when he is killed, after three days he will rise.” (Mark 9:30-31, RSV)

What a sacred seminar that must have been! What a holy college, to be gathered together with Jesus, to hear him teach them the way of the Cross.

Let me list some of the things Jesus taught his disciples in those days. First off, he reminded them of eternity. This passage has always been a powerful one for me:

<sup>35</sup>For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel’s, the same shall save it. <sup>36</sup>For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? (Mark 8:35-36, KJV)

Lose his own soul. Lose her own soul. How could this question not have caught their attention? How could it have not echoed henceforth in their minds? Jesus is not speaking of a game, but of the truth of a human life.

He taught them how terrible it is to mislead the children:

<sup>42</sup>Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung round his neck and he were thrown into the sea. (Mark 9:42, RSV)

We heard that saying recently, just a couple Sundays ago.

And then there was that recent scene when Jesus busted his disciples on the very temptation he will have to address all over again in today's reading:

<sup>33</sup>And they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" <sup>34</sup>But they were silent; for on the way they had discussed with one another who was the greatest. <sup>35</sup>And he sat down and called the twelve; and he said to them, "If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all. (Mark 9:33-35, RSV)

Jesus taught this way of the cross, this way of humility and self-sacrifice, to his disciples, but it seems to have fallen on deaf ears. And so this morning we see two of the inner disciples – James and John – requesting seats of glory in Christ's coming kingdom. They start off with a kind of child's request: Please give us whatever we want:

And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him, and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." <sup>36</sup>And he said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" <sup>37</sup>And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." (Mark 10:35-37, RSV)

Amen! Alleluia!

It is as if Jesus has been preaching to a blank wall. He has spoken of his way of the Cross. He has spoken of a death he freely accepts that you and I might live. He has asked his disciples to take up their cross and follow him. He has asked them to be willing to be last and servant of all. Yet now two of his closest disciples come to him and ask to be first in his kingdom.

Can we speak sympathetically of these two disciples? I think we can. I do not want to condemn these disciples, for I fear that I am too much like them. Many of

you might agree. I fear that I am wooden-headed, slow to learn, slow to comprehend.

We poor human beings! We have access to Jesus -- in the church, in the sacraments, in the Bible, in the witness of pious parents and grandparents, in serious conversations with one another. And yet, it is hard – very hard – for any of us to fundamentally learn anything new.

Jesus is the Master Teacher, yes. He is the very Bishop and Guardian of our souls (1 Peter 2:25). And yet this story about the slowness of the disciples to comprehend Jesus reminds us that nothing is easy in following Jesus. We are all swept along by various notions. Who knows where we got them all? For many of us, a lot of our convictions come from our schools or from the *New York Times*. Who knows all the origins of our various notions? But they are part of us. They structure our perceptions and our passions.

In the case of the disciples, they are swept along by certain notions about the Messiah – popular, settled notions that seem as right as rain to them. They are convinced that the Messiah is to be a conquering hero for the liberation of Israel. No, “convinced” is not the right word. It is not that they have listened to all the arguments about the Messiah and have *concluded* that he is a conquering hero. Rather, the notion that he is a conquering hero is a presupposition of their thought. It is as close to them as their own vision. They perceive what accords with this notion about the Messiah, and that which is contrary to that notion, seems to simply slip on by them.

So, Jesus goes on and on about his way of the Cross, but it does not compute for his disciples. It is really hard for them to take it in. It is really hard for *me* to take it in. I try to be true to Jesus, but I am a child of the modern world, and it is hard for me to perceive the ways in which I fail to understand my Saviour Jesus. The disciples loved Jesus and wanted to be true to him, but they often failed to understand him aright. I am sure that I often fail too.

But here is the good thing about Jesus: he is a Teacher who does not go away. In this morning’s reading, for example, Jesus does not throw up his arms in exasperation and stomp away from James and John. Instead, he tries once again to teach them:

“You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. <sup>43</sup>But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup>and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.  
(Mark 10:42-43, RSV)

He will go on teaching his way of the Cross in the most powerful of ways: He will carry that Cross until it kills him. Then, he will rise from the dead and teach it again, and again, through all eternity, giving us a chance, as long as we have life in us, to come to some new thoughts and to some new convictions.

To use some of the words of Isaiah of old, the ministry of Jesus is gentle, but also it is steady and persevering:

<sup>2</sup>He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; <sup>3</sup>a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.

<sup>4</sup>He will not fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; (Isaiah 42:2-4, RSV)

God willing, I will yet learn a thing or two from this good Teacher. God willing, we will all yet learn a thing or two from this good Teacher, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen