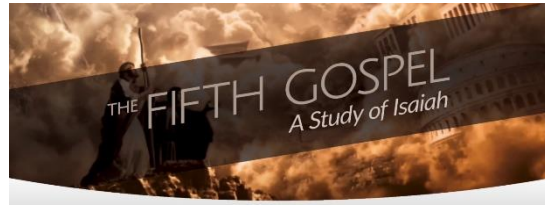


The Fifth Gospel: A Study of Isaiah
Session 5: “The Suffering Servant” (Dec. 6, 2021)
Father Jonathan Bailes
Reading: Isaiah chapters 49-54
Focus Verses: Isaiah 52:13-53:12



Lesson Summary:

Isaiah’s twin themes of judgment against sin and comfort for sinners sit in unresolved tension with one another for much of the book. How can we reconcile these two messages? How is it possible for the Holy One of Israel to uphold the claims of justice while simultaneously speaking words of mercy and compassion toward those who are guilty of injustice? In Isaiah 52:13-53:12, we find the answer to these questions. The reason that Isaiah is able to declare peace and healing and comfort to sinful Israel, and to us as well, is because a faithful servant has borne the holy judgment of God in our place.

Isaiah is a difficult book. You may remember that I made a point of that in our very first session. And if you've been reading through this book along with the study, you'll no doubt have now experienced it for yourself. This book is no easy read. Part of the reason, as I mentioned earlier, is because there's no real, clear, logical or chronological structure to it. It doesn't read like a story, nor does it really read like an argument or treatise that you can follow from one point to another.

Instead, Isaiah seems to just go around and around repeating the same themes again and again with a sort of dizzying array of visions and images. But that's not the only thing that makes this book difficult.

Another thing that's hard about Isaiah is that it seems to contradict itself. Think about the themes that have arisen in our first four sessions. For the first three sessions, we focused on Isaiah's indictment of the people of Judah for their injustice and idolatry and his declaration of the coming judgment of God - the day of the Lord when the holy one of Israel would show up and bring justice.

In our last session, I talked about Isaiah's other message - his message of comfort. Yes, the people of Judah had sinned. Yes, they have failed at their calling to be God's witnesses and his chosen servant people. Nevertheless, Isaiah says it appears that God is not finished with them. Despite the judgment that has come upon them they can take comfort, Isaiah says, because God is determined to redeem them from their misery, to restore them to their purpose.

All of this is wonderful news. It is good news. So wonderful, in fact, that Isaiah calls on all of creation at one point to join in celebrating this announcement of what God is declaring he will do.



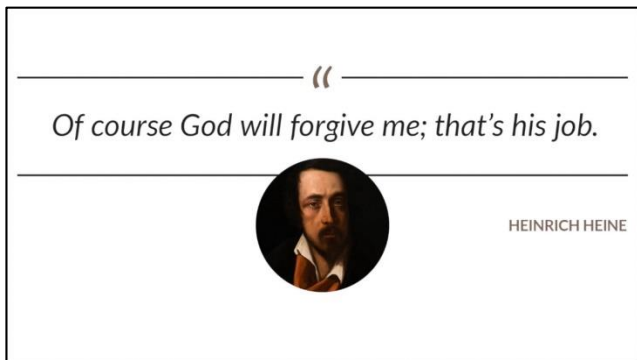
*Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;
 break forth, O mountains, into singing! For
 the LORD has comforted his people and
 will have compassion on his afflicted.*

ISAIAH 49:13

Like I said, this is wonderful news, but it also seems to be a direct contradiction of what Isaiah said earlier about the holiness and justice of God.

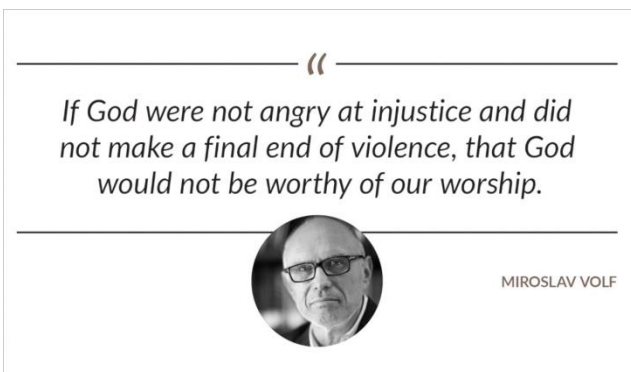
After all, if God's holy justice compels him to respond in judgment against rebellion and injustice and violence, on what basis is he now acting with compassion and comfort? Has the holy one of Israel changed his mind? Is he now choosing to simply overlook injustice? Has God simply decided to forgo the claims of justice? To overlook the idolatry and the unjust oppression that his people have been guilty of - what they have done?

That's certainly how I think some people understand the good news of salvation. Note the final words of the German poet Heinrich Heine as he was laying on his deathbed:



Now, that's a shockingly bold statement, but it isn't really all that different from how many of us think about the mercy of God. God forgives - he just gets over it. He overlooks wrongdoing. That's just what he does.

But is that the message of Isaiah? Is that the good news that he was announcing to Judah when he spoke of comfort and compassion? If so, it's not, in fact, that good. For as the Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf says (writing in a context of experiencing the injustices of war):



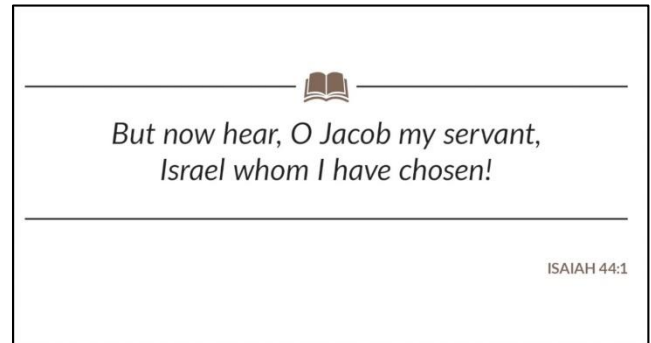
Isaiah has made it clear that God is, in fact, opposed to injustice. He is angered by it. But Isaiah has also announced that God is comforting and redeeming his people. The question is how can he do both? How can God demonstrate both holy justice, but also merciful love to a people who are themselves guilty?

Throughout much of the book of Isaiah, the answer to this question isn't very clear. It just hangs out there like an unresolved dilemma.

At least, that is, until you get to Isaiah 52. Isaiah 52:13 through the end of chapter 53 is one of the most famous passages in the whole book, especially for Christians.

It's often referred to as the fourth "servant song" because it's the fourth of a series of poetic passages. These poetic passages that begin in chapter 42 and that describe this figure that the Lord refers to as "his servant."

Now you might remember that in our previous session, I talked about how Isaiah uses this phrase to refer to the people of Israel. In Isaiah chapter 44, for instance, we read:



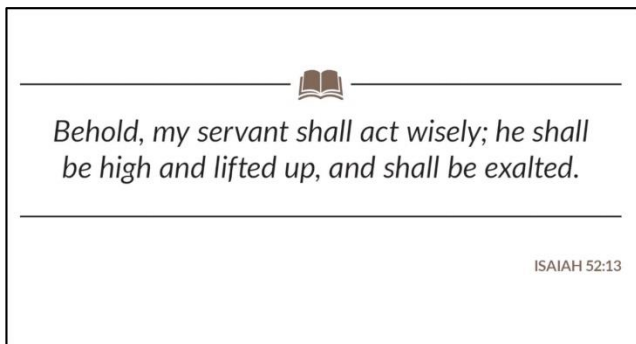
That's one of the reasons why many interpreters of Isaiah, a lot of people who have read this book (both Jewish and Christian), have thought that in this first servant song in chapter 42 Isaiah is actually talking about the people of Israel as a whole.

But something changes by the time you get to the second servant song that you find in chapter 49. Because there it's clear that the title of servant is no longer referring to the people of Israel, but to some distinct individual. Someone who is being given the task of redeeming and restoring these exiled tribes of Israel. As the great Old Testament scholar Brevard Childs says in his commentary on this passage:



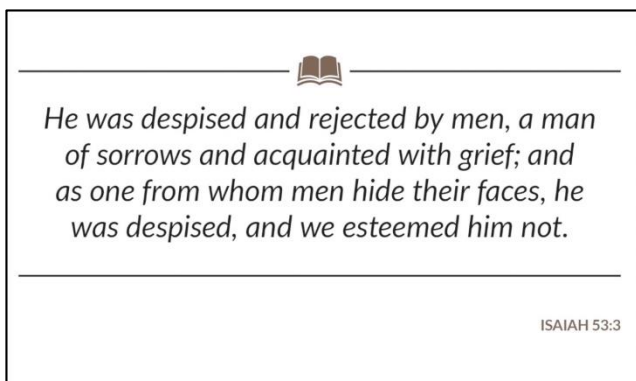
Isaiah never gives a name to this individual, but he does describe him. He says that he is a faithful servant, that he will be a light for the nations, that this servant is not rebellious as the nation Israel had been.

Then in the fourth servant song in Isaiah 52 and 53, we learned something more - something that really sounds rather shocking - but also helps to resolve this great dilemma that's been building throughout the book. This fourth servant song starts off normal enough:



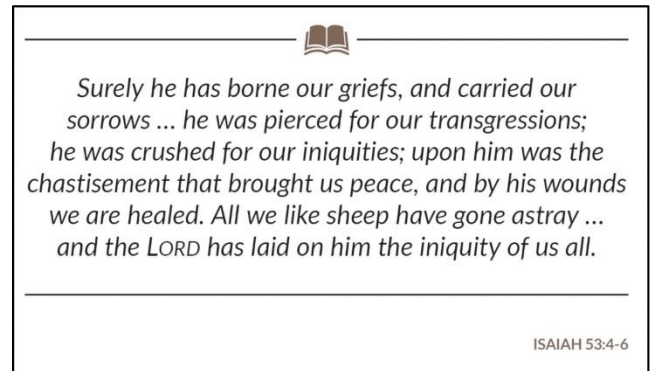
No great surprise there. Whoever this servant is, it's pretty clear that he's faithful in all that he does. It's not surprising to hear that he will act wisely or that he will be honored and exalted.

But what comes next is more of a shock. Isaiah goes on to say that those who see this servant are astonished because his appearance has been so marred and distorted that he is no longer even recognizably human. If that weren't enough, he says of this faithful servant (who is honored and exalted by God):



A man of sorrows. A man who is intimately familiar with grief. A man who deserves praise, but is instead

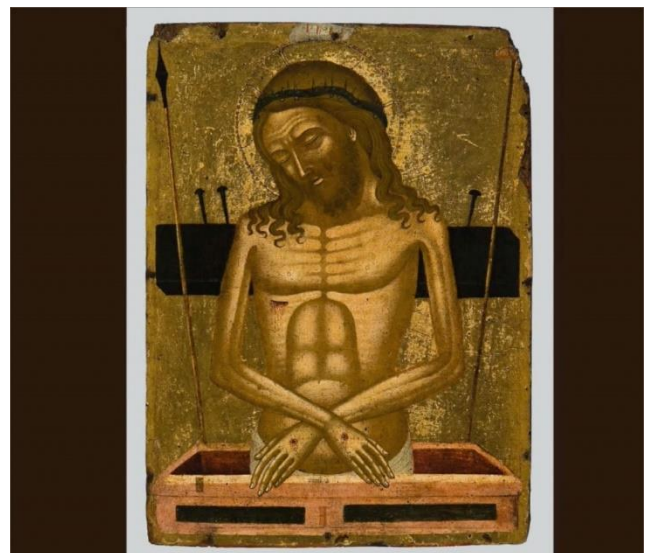
met with derision and shame. And more than that, Isaiah says that **we** are the ones who despised and rejected him. And not only does he say that we, his readers, are the ones who have despised and rejected this servant. He also says that it is our grief and our sorrow that the servant experiences.



Several verses later, Isaiah goes on to say that it was the Lord's will for this servant to suffer and that through his suffering and through his death, many will be made righteous and will experience peace. Isaiah himself never specifies who this servant is, nor is it clear that Isaiah the prophet actually knows. He is simply relaying the word which he has received from the Lord.

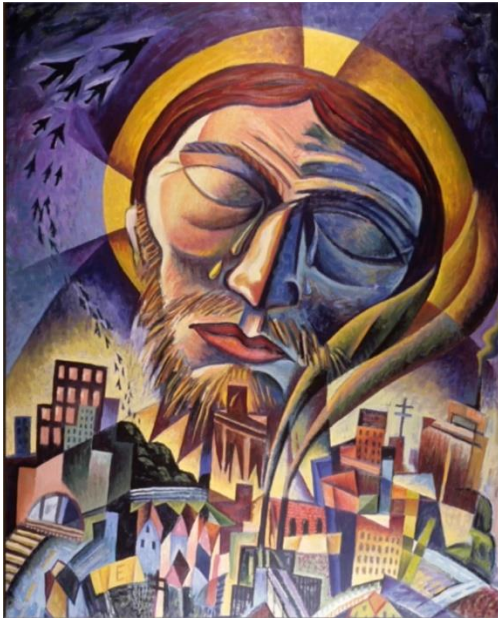
But Christians have never been in any doubt about his identity. We know whom Isaiah was referring to, even if he himself did not.

We know exactly who this man of sorrows was in what form his suffering took.





In fact, we've made the suffering of this servant more central to our life together than almost anything else.



Every time that Christians gather as a church for worship, we remember the humiliation and the suffering that he endured when we rehearse his death with bread and wine. Everywhere you look, you can see that we have placed crosses - symbols of his suffering - as a reminder of what he endured, of the humiliation and the pain.

But why is that? Why do Christians not only remember, but even celebrate the suffering of Christ? Interestingly enough, the book of Isaiah actually has a lot to say about this question - why is it that this is a cause for celebration?

Remember what I said about the dilemma that we find at the heart of this book. One of Isaiah's central themes is that the Holy One of Israel, the Lord of Armies, is a god of justice. And that when he comes, he will come to set all things right. In and of itself, that's good news.

We all long for justice. As the Anglican bishop N.T. Wright puts it:

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We dream the dream of justice. We glimpse, for a moment, a world at one, a world put to rights ...



N.T. WRIGHT

Isaiah says that this is precisely what the holy one will do when he comes. He will rectify wrongs, he will right injustices, he will put the world to rights.

The problem is that Isaiah also makes it very clear that injustice, corruption, and violence - it's not just a problem for those people outside the people of God. Injustice is something that has infected God's own people.

Isaiah makes it pretty clear that all of us are guilty, not just some ancient Egyptians or ancient Babylonians, not just some ancient Jews in exile. All of us, he says, are guilty of idolatry and injustice. And that's why this message about a suffering servant is good news. Because it means that God doesn't simply overlook injustice. He doesn't just change his mind and decide to get over it. He does, in fact, bring judgment.

But it also means that there is someone who bears that judgment on behalf of the many. That's what Isaiah means when he says that the servant is pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. That he bears the chastisement that brings us peace.

That's what St. Peter is referring to in his epistle, when he says:



[Christ] himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. 'By his wounds you have been healed.'

1 PETER 2:24

Then quoting Isaiah 53, Peter says "by his wounds, you have been healed." After 2000 years of Christian history, we've become accustomed to the idea that Jesus, the faithful servant, took our place and bore the weight of judgment on our behalf. It is something we say regularly.

But within the context of the book of Isaiah, the news of this suffering servant is unexpected. No doubt it sounds very strange. How can one man take the place of an unjust and idolatrous people? How can his soul, as Isaiah says, make an offering for their guilt? This is odd, as the church father Theodoret of Cyrus said:

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This is a new and strange way of healing: the physician underwent the operation, but the sickly patient obtained the cure.



THEODORET OF CYRUS

And in our own day, there are many people who object to this whole idea. They find the notion of the servant suffering on behalf of others is morally repugnant. After all, how is it just for God to pour out his wrath on an innocent man? Doesn't this amount to some kind of abuse?

This is an important and serious question. It deserves a much more thorough answer than I can give in this session. But I will say one thing. When you read the song of the suffering servant in Isaiah 52 and 53, it seems that the servant and God are entirely separate. That God is the one dispensing judgment, and that the servant is simply an innocent victim who has taken the place of the guilty. But the

New Testament makes it clear that the servant is not merely some human victim. The servant is in fact God himself in human form.

It is not the case that God has found an innocent bystander to bear the weight of his holy judgment. No, the one who bears that weight is, in fact, none other than God himself. The holy one of Israel.

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The passion of Jesus Christ is the judgment of God in which the Judge Himself was judged.



KARL BARTH

That's how God solves the dilemma of how to honor the demands of justice while showing mercy and love to an unjust people. He himself takes their place. The judge is judged on our behalf.

Whatever Isaiah's first readers might have expected God to do, they could hardly have anticipated that. But that is the word that came to Isaiah. That's the good news of the faithful servant, that man of sorrows.

What are we to say to such things? Perhaps we needn't say anything at all. Perhaps the only thing left for us to do is to respond in the way that Christians have responded to this news (to this song) for thousands of years - with grateful praise. As one hymn writer so memorably put it:

*Man of Sorrows, What a name,
For the son of God who came,
Ruined sinners to reclaim,
Hallelujah! What a savior!*

*Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
In my place condemned he stood,
Sealed my pardon with his blood.
What shall we say?
Hallelujah! What a savior!*

Read and reflect on Isaiah 49-54 during the coming week.