

“See, my servant shall prosper... Surely he has borne our infirmities... upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed... yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors... See, my servant shall prosper.”

This week we conclude our Lenten sermon series “The Deep, Deep Love of Jesus,” which has taken us back through the Old Testament looking at texts that inform and deepen our understanding of Christ’s death and resurrection. We began with the unnervingly vivid description of sacrifice seen in the story of Abraham preparing to sacrifice Isaac. Then we heard the words of the prophet Hosea who spoke of the Lord like a parent who loves a child even though times of rejection. Last week, we examined the cry of the afflicted in Psalm 22, which Jesus would later echo in his cry from the cross, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Now, this week, we turn our attention to the prophet Isaiah, who poetically describes the “suffering servant,” an unnamed person who suffers great afflictions for the sake of the people of God. In some deep deep mysterious act of love, this figure takes on the punishment for sins he did not commit, and in his death the people of God are made free.

The season of Lent has a variety of different meaning among Christians world-wide. Different groups celebrate it in different ways...well, I don’t know if “celebrate” is the right word...let’s say people “observe” Lent in a variety of ways. Some people make sacrifices, fast, give things up. Others add new disciplines to their lives or new areas of focus in their prayers. Others don’t recognize this time as any different than the rest of the year. Regardless of how it is Observed, at its most basic level, the season of Lent is a time of preparation. Preparation for Easter...or more broadly, preparation for Holy Week that takes us from Palm Sunday and Jesus’ peaceful seemingly triumphal entry into Jerusalem, then to the temple where money tables get overturned, then to a Last Supper in an upper room, then to a prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, then to a betrayal, an arrest, a trial, and finally to a death on the cross...and then suddenly, miraculously, scandalously to the sight that we would never have expected to see: An empty tomb. The story of Jesus’ death and resurrection is so important to our faith that we dedicate and entire season (40 days) to preparing ourselves for it. And what better way to prepare ourselves than by reliving the story.

The usual way we tell the story of Jesus’ passion is to begin with his arrest, then plunge lower into his suffering, and completely descend to the depths of his death on the cross, before final being pulled back up to glorious new heights by his resurrection. We follow the course of events in chorological order because...well because that’s how stories work. You have to have a beginning, then a middle, then an end. I love to listen to and read stories, and for me, the end is the really important part. I can really enjoy reading a novel, but if the end is too hokey, cheesy, unbelievable, or just leaves a lot of loose ends still dangling, then I end up disappointed with the story as a whole. I really need a good ending. Not necessarily a happy ending, but a good, satisfying, right ending.

What better ending is there than the one that finishes the story of Jesus’ time on earth. We, the readers of the gospels, follow Jesus around Palestine and hear all his teachings, see all his healings, experience the majestic moments of his baptism and transfiguration, we even are pulled into his own little stories of parables. And after reading through this story we are certainly not disappointed with the ending. After the terrible suffering and death that Jesus endures on the cross, the good news of the resurrection is the right ending...the perfect ending to the story. It’s the right ending because it is in keeping with everything that Jesus said and did throughout his life. Jesus’ story is the story of God’s Deep Deep Love for us. That Jesus would serve, suffer, and die for our sins is the story of how much God is willing to undergo on our

behalf. And what better end to this story is there than the resurrection? For in it we see that not only is Christ's suffering for us the extreme sacrifice of grace, but God's triumph over death itself has set up free. What an ending!

Well, the prophet Isaiah has a little different take on the story. Writing 500 years before Christ's death and resurrection, Isaiah tells us of the Suffering Servant who “bears our infirmities, carries our diseases, is wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him is the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.

As powerful as Isaiah's words and images are, we have to admit, he is certainly a surprising story teller. You see, we want our stories to be told the right way, with a clear beginning, good middle, and perfect ending. But Isaiah is a surprising story teller. You see, Isaiah doesn't want to follow that usual pattern. He starts with the ending. He tells the story of the suffering servant but he begins with the good news of the ending: “See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up...” It's as if we were to read about Jesus being raised from the dead before later finding out who exactly he was...the suffering servant who gave his life that we might be reconciled to God. Now what kind of story is that? Who starts with the end? Who tells a story backwards?....

Well, Isaiah does... And so did the disciples in the early church...And so do we today.

Isaiah told the story of redemptive suffering backwards because he wanted us to be absolutely certain that we got the point of it of what he was saying. This poem about the suffering servant tells the story in such a way that we can clearly see God's intention of love and reconciliation being worked out all along. When we tell stories the usual way it's we usually do so in a cause and effect kind of way: The dog chased the cat, so the cat climbed up the tree, so I called the fire department, so the fireman came with his ladder to get the cat down, so that's why there's some a fireman in your yard. When we tell stories like this it's hard to see the connection between the beginning and the end...one event follows the next, but there doesn't seem to be any purpose uniting them all together.

It's for this exact reason that Isaiah goes ahead and spoils the ending because he wants us to see the purpose of God at work throughout the entire story of the suffering servant. God's love for us is clear at every point in Isaiah's story. Because we know that the servant is suffering for a reason, it makes his suffering all the more powerful. Because we know that it is for our sins that he suffers, it makes his love all the more clear. Because we know that death does not have the final word, it gives us the strength to endure the unexplainable suffering in our lives and especially in the lives of those we love. Sometimes, the story is so tragic that we have to know the end if we're ever to endure the beginning.

Think of the movie the Titanic, which begins with an old woman remembering her time on a cruise ship many many years ago. All of us who watched the movie knew what was going to happen in the end (It was called the Titanic after all) but because we saw the face of this woman at the beginning we knew the little bit of Good news, that as tragic as this story would surely be, there was at least a tiny hope of survival. We knew that no matter what suffering we were about to see on the screen, this woman's life at least would be spared...she would prosper you might say.

Likewise, Isaiah gives us this little glimpse of the end at the beginning, “My servant shall prosper...” He does so to give us the courage to keep on reading. So, Isaiah is certainly a surprising story teller, but his role as a prophet isn't to tell good stories for stories sake, it's to tell us the depths of God's suffering love for us, which changes the way we experience the story.

Not only does Isaiah tell his story backwards, so too did the disciples in the early church. It was not until after the death and resurrection of Jesus that they finally understood what following a Savior who was Suffering Servant meant.

Those first disciples who had followed Christ around Galilee and lived through those crucial days of the first Holy Week saw it all first hand. They were there for the Sermon on the Mount, the raising of Lazarus, the Last Supper. They saw it all, but in the wake of Jesus' death they were filled with fear and terror and doubt. Not one of them, not a single one of them, went through those days saying, "Guys this isn't the end. Remember what Jesus said about how he would suffer, remember all his teachings about how he came to save the world, don't worry, God's purposes are surely being worked out." NO, certainly not. None of them was able to understand the story until they knew the ending. Until they knew the reality of the resurrection nothing else made any sense at all. It was only after experiencing the risen Christ that they were able to comprehend that this story was actually a story of Good News. They needed the end of the story, they needed to hear Isaiah's words, "See, my servant will prosper" before they could ever understand that "upon him was the punishment that made us whole."

Once they had experienced the reality of the resurrection they were then able to follow the Spirit's calling of gathering together the church and spreading the good news of the story of Christ. Only after they knew the reality of the resurrection could they write down the stories of Jesus' life with the knowledge that God was at work in it all along in this Suffering Servant. Only after they knew the reality of the resurrection could they dare to look to the cross, this image of torture and death, and use it as a symbol of hope and new life. They needed the ending before they could begin telling the story.

This pattern of telling the story backwards or telling the end before the beginning continued throughout the church's history. Do you know where the whole idea of Lent began? In the ancient church this wasn't just the season for Christians to prepare to celebrate Easter, it was the time that many of them prepared to become Christians in the first place. In the early centuries of the church, Easter was the one day in the year that new Christians would be baptized and enter the life of the church. So, Easter was the new beginning of people's lives of faith, and Lent developed as a time to prepare for one's baptism and to make the profession of faith that we now know as the Apostles' Creed. It was the ancient version of what we would call Confirmation. Easter was the day that one entered the covenant community that identified itself as the body of Christ. Now you may be thinking, what does this have to do with telling the story backwards? Well isn't it interesting that new Christians didn't begin their life of faith on Christmas, the day that we celebrate Jesus' birth, but they started on Easter, at the end of the story. The early church seemed to be saying that the resurrection is so important that it should be the launching point, the birthday, home port of all of one's Christian life. Start with the good news of the resurrection and then work your way backwards as you seek to live a life of faith that is modeled after the life of Christ. Telling the story backwards.

Finally, we too tell the story backwards today. We don't start with suffering then hope for the good news of redemption in the end. No, like Isaiah, we are aware that God's purposes of love are not something we have to wait to become a reality. We know the good news' that Christ's life, death, and resurrection mean that we are accepted and loved by God already, and we live our lives of faith in response to the good news that God's end has already been made a reality in Christ. For us, this means two things.

First, Christ lived and died as THE Suffering Servant, and his sacrifice shows us the depths that God goes not only to suffer with us (as we saw in Psalm 22) but also to suffer for us.

Isaiah says that the suffering servant was stricken for our transgressions, but that through the suffering of this “righteous one,” we are made righteous. So, on the one hand, knowing that Christ has served as the suffering servant frees us from self-righteous attempts to save ourselves or others through our own sufferings.

On the other hand, as members of the body of Christ, the Church, we freely respond to the good news of the resurrection by living lives of service...even lives of sacrificial service to others. We do so because we know that it is in the face of those who suffer that we find Christ present among us. We care for those who are sick, we feed those who are hungry, and we give to those in need not so that we can “save them” and feel good about our service but because we are thankful for the grace of God that we all equally and undeservedly receive. We give until we can give no more, we love until our eyes run dry from crying, we turn our lives upside down for those who suffer because in them we see Christ.

Isaiah tells us the end of the story so that we can then begin to enter it and see God at work. As we prepare for Easter, let us do so with the knowledge that we already know and celebrate the end of this story. In doing so, we prepare to enter the story ourselves and learn the truth, as did those first disciples, that what we thought was the end turns out to be only the beginning of our lives of faith. Thanks be to God for Stories told backwards! Amen