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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR B

Alternative readings:

Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35b

Hebrews 5:1-10

Mark 10:35-45

[1-3 Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look on him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. 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.]

Surely 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. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. 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.

Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the LORD shall prosper. Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

ENTERING THE STORY

Today's text is the third of what are called "the Servant Songs" found in Second Isaiah. This later portion of the prophetic scroll (dated about 539 in contrast to Isaiah 1-40 that was composed between 742-687 when Israel was imperiled by the Assyrians) is said to celebrate the return of Judah to Jerusalem from Babylon thanks to Cyrus, king of Persia. The other two "Servant songs" are found in 42:1-9 and 49:1-7.

There is little agreement among scholars about the interpretation of these songs or poems. Possibilities include: (1) the poetry suggests Jesus without any claim that such an anticipation was intended by the author; (2) that the songs are not about an individual but about exilic servant Israel; (3) that, as John Calvin taught, the prophecy prefigures and predicts a first century Jesus; (4) that the quest for any historical referent is impossible and one can only pay attention and learn from the poetry and imagery.

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. Let's begin by agreeing with Calvin, the Book of Acts and Episcopal Book of Common Prayer Holy Week lectionary, many liturgies, preachers and Handel's "Messiah." Note that the Book of Common Prayer offers the choice of Isaiah 52:13-53:12 to be read on Good Friday. In Acts 8:26-35 Philip proclaims the good news of Jesus to the Ethiopian eunuch who is reading a portion of today's Isaiah text **Acts 8:26-35**:

"Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.)

So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth.

In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth."

The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus."

Circle or underline verses, images and metaphors in today's text that bring Jesus to your mind. Focus on ways in which the Isaiah text might refer to Jesus—anticipate his life, death and resurrection.

If the Servant songs and this one in particular are anticipatory and predictive of Jesus of Nazareth in the first century, what is being suggested about the meaning and purpose of Hebrew Scripture? How does a prophet of ancient Israel therefore correlate with the Christian story about Jesus? What is thus being implied about the intention of all scripture? What is being said about the relationship between the Christian "Old Testament" and the scripture of the Jews? Between Christians and Jews?

If the texts are not about Jesus, then what? Who do you suppose might be the "servant"? What might the poetry and images be suggesting about the experience of the Jews who after nearly a century in exile in Babylon are now returning home to Jerusalem?

2. No go back and circle or underline portions of the text that though you may not understand them nevertheless you know intuitively to be true in our world today. What is being said here about suffering and wounds that in some way are part of a healing process? How does it speak to you of a "wounded healer" then and now?

What is being said about pain and injustice that are at the heart of any hope for reconciliation in Jesus' time and today? How have we gone astray—turned our own way—and how is our return or redemption now dependent upon the choice of others than ourselves?

What between the lines suggests that we cannot heal ourselves? How might being crushed by pain not be the last word? How does another make intercession—stand in between our darkness and holy hope—in ways we cannot do for ourselves?

3. Pick one verse or phrase from the text that touches a deep chord in you. Write it down on a 3x5 card or enter it in the notes section of your phone and carry it with you all week long. Through these days return to it when you awaken or go to bed, at meal times and coffee break, on the bus or as you wait for the red light to turn green. Ask what wants to touch your heart as well as enlighten your head. Embrace that truth and let it be—without having to figure it out or have it make sense.

BETWEEN THE LINES

▪ Consider the story of the suffering servant, the story told here in Isaiah and claimed by the Christian tradition as a foretelling of Jesus' role in human history. If religious faith serves, at least in part, as an expression of psychological truth, how does this story of the suffering servant function in the modern world and in our own lives? What really happens when we take on the sins and suffering of others on their behalf? How does such suffering manifest itself in us physically, emotionally, and spiritually? What happens to those we've "saved"? Describe the

healing that does (or doesn't) take place? What movement toward wholeness do we initiate—for ourselves, for the other, for the world? What does such vicarious atonement do to our relationships with those we've saved? To our relationships with other loved ones? To a relationship with ourselves? To our relationship with God? Does being a servant require suffering? Is suffering a form of serving? And, if so, who does it really serve?

- In ENTERING THE STORY it is noted, "There is little agreement among scholars about the interpretation of these songs or poems. Possibilities include: (1) the poetry suggests Jesus without any claim that such an anticipation was intended by the author; (2) that the songs are not about an individual but about exilic servant Israel; (3) that as John Calvin taught the prophecy prefigures and predicts a first century Jesus; (4) that the quest for any historical referent is impossible and one can only pay attention and learn from the poetry and imagery." So, pick the possibility that resonates most for you and reread the passage with that "interpretation" in mind. What more does having an "authority" support your opinion do for your understanding or even your faith? Now read it through the lens of the possibility that resonates the least. Is there something new or more that comes to mind? Does it make less sense or, perhaps, more? Name and wonder about what you might feel yourself resisting. Might there be something about reading it "otherwise" that makes you rethink your first choice? Or did you feel doing this was a waste of your time?
- *He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? When in your life have you been oppressed? When have you been afflicted? What do you know of a perversion of justice? Did you open your mouth? What came out of your mouth? To whom was it directed? Did you go like a lamb that is led to the slaughter? Or not? What do you know of one who did not open his mouth? What do you know of a god whose will is to crush (you) with pain? Take some time, and some art materials, and give expression to this wounded and oppressed one. Put on some pensive music—perhaps Steven Isserlis playing Faure Cello Sonata No 2 in G Minor—and hold your image of this suffering one in your care. What do you now know that you didn't know?*



Listen to Steven Isserlis and Jeremy Denk here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-osqH-PzF9s>

EXPLORING FURTHER

How many
 days does the janitor enter the room
 of your soul, wipe it clean
 go out into the hallway
 and push his broom
 down the long corridor, full
 of doors to so many rooms.—*Stuart Kestenbaum*



Read the entire poem here:

<https://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php%3Fdate=2012%252F03%252F10.html>

From *Isaiah* by Walter Brueggemann

The grammatical particle opening verse 4 is an adversative of surprise, something like "Nevertheless." It was this one, this little one of no account, who now becomes the subject of active verbs. This nobody from whom nothing is expected is about to do something decisive. The second half of verse 4 picks up the theme of verses 2-3: "We did not expect anything."

In spite of such a dismissive prognosis over this "nobody," miracles happened. This very one—this marred, dismissed nobody—took on himself disabilities and diseases, hurts caused by sin, punishments. By taking all this on, this servant was wounded, crushed, and bruised—and "we" were healed. The poetry cannot be reduced to a rational formula. It must remain poetry that glides over rational reservation. We are not told how hurt and guilt can be reassigned and redeployed from one to another. We are not told how the suffering of one makes healing possible for another. But it is so here; "we" have thus been healed and made whole. We are here in this pastorally delicate transaction that is at the core of salvific faith, a mystery with which Christian faith has endlessly struggled through competing theories of atonement. This poet offers no such theory. Instead, the poem offers a confession, an admission, a dazzlement, and an acknowledgment. It is this deeply Jewish affirmation that has been transposed for us into the mystery of new life in Christ.

The wonder of the healing is linked in verse 6 to a confession of sin. "We" have all been wayward, all recalcitrant, like mindless, unresponsive sheep who graze off the path without heeding the summoning voice of the shepherd; in such autonomy we wander off into jeopardy and risk. The servant has been made to answer for such waywardness.

This poem, in addition to its stunning affirmation of the work of the servant, is dominated by first-person pronouns: "we, our, our, us, we, we, we, our, us." This is no cold, detached, reasonable statement. It is, rather, the voice of those who have been healed and are as bewildered as they are grateful. The "we" who speaks here is whoever voices the poem in bewilderment and gratitude. Critically, we imagine the voice to be that of exilic Jews who are dazzled by the turn of their life; derivatively, of course, it has become, in Christian parlance, all those who have relied on Jesus. But to ask this question from the outside is to miss the intimate, confessional tone of the pronouns. The lines of the poem are permitted on the lips of whoever it is who benefits from this indescribable transformation, this gospel calculus that denies the world that wants to assign and pigeonhole and locate when it turns out that the flow of healing works by suffering embraced. The "we" who speaks here knows that much, precisely because life has been transformed. It is known here that one life can be vulnerable enough to permit restoration of another. Indeed, the servant is not only effective one-on-one, one life in the place of another, but effects the new beginning for the entire community.

From "The Sign of Jonah" in *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer* by Richard Rohr

Beginner's mind is a posture of eagerness, of spiritual hunger. The beginner's mind knows it needs something. This is a rare feeling in today's treacherously seductive culture, however. Because it is so immediately satisfying, it is hard to remain spiritually hungry. We give answers too quickly, take away pain too easily, and too quickly stimulate. [...]

To resist the instant fix and acknowledge oneself as a beginner is to be open to transformation. [...] I think Jesus' primary metaphor for the mystery of transformation is the sign of Jonah. This sign has taken on a great significance for me. In Luke's Gospel passage in which Jesus tells us, "It is an evil and adulterous generation that wants a sign", he then says the only sign he will give us is the sign of Jonah. As a good Jew, Jesus knew the graphic story of Jonah the prophet, who was running from God and was used by God almost in spite of himself. Jonah was swallowed by the whale and taken where he would rather not go. This was Jesus' metaphor for death and rebirth. Think of all the other signs, apparitions, and miracles that religion looks for and seeks and even tries to create. But Jesus says it is an evil and adulterous generation that looks for these things. That's a pretty hard

saying. He says instead we must go inside the belly of the whale for a while. Then and only then will we be spit upon a new shore and understand our call. That's the only pattern Jesus promises us. Paul spoke of "reproducing the pattern" of his death and thus understanding resurrection. That teaching will never fail. The soul is always freed and formed in such wisdom. Native religions speak of winter and summer; mystical authors speak of darkness and light; Eastern religion speaks of yin and yang or the Tao. Seasons transform the year; light and darkness transform the day. Christians call it the paschal mystery, but we are all pointing to the same necessity of both descent and ascent.

The paschal mystery is the pattern of transformation. We are transformed through death and rising, probably many times. There seems to be no other cauldron of growth and transformation.

We seldom go freely into the belly of the beast. Unless we face a major disaster like the death of a friend or spouse or loss of a marriage or job, we usually will not go there. As a culture, we have to be taught the language of descent. That is the great language of religion. It teaches us to enter willingly, trustingly into the dark periods of life. These dark periods are good teachers. Religious energy is in the dark questions, seldom in the answers. Answers are way out, but that is not what we are here for. But when we look at the questions, we look for the opening to transformation. Fixing something doesn't usually transform us. We try to change events in order to avoid changing ourselves. We must learn to stay with the pain of life, without answers, without conclusions, and some days without meaning. That is the path, the perilous dark path of true prayer.

From "Respect the Future" by David Brooks in *The New York Times*

Last fall I asked readers over 70 to send me "Life Reports" — essays evaluating their own lives. Charles Darwin Snelling responded with a remarkable 5,000-word reflection.

Snelling was a successful entrepreneur who spent decades serving his community. He was redeemed, he reported, six years ago when his beloved wife, Adrienne, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. "She took care of me in every possible way she could for 55 years. The last six years have been my turn," Snelling wrote.

"We continue to make a life together, living together in the full sense of the word; going about our life, hand in hand, with everyone lending a hand, as though nothing was wrong at all," he continued.

He believed that caring for his wife made him a richer, fuller human being: "It's not noble, it's not sacrificial and it's not painful. It's just right in the scheme of things...."

On March 29, less than four months after we published his essay online, Snelling killed his wife and then himself.



Read the entire article here:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/03/opinion/brooks-respect-the-future.html>