

Sermon for Good Friday 2014 Isaiah 52:13-53:12

"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."

It is not the norm to preach on the Old Testament on this day, Good Friday, when we hear John's story of the pain and suffering of Jesus as his human life comes to an end. But I would suggest that if we are trying to make sense of John's story, we need to hear what Isaiah has to say.

It is not necessarily true that Isaiah is speaking specifically about Jesus – a prophecy of what is to come – but it is certainly about one who suffers in service to his people. And even more importantly, this one not only accepts suffering in the course of his work, the suffering actually becomes the tool of his work.

If we did this today, we'd be accused of being masochistic. Who would do this, to deliberately suffer? To appear noble, perhaps, by stretching ourselves well beyond our breaking point to be applauded by the crowd? To tolerate it because it occurred while we were doing our work, much like we get a sore back when we work too long out in the garden? To accept it as a logical consequence, when our feet hurt after walking ten kilometers?

But this servant, the one of whom Isaiah speaks, takes the punishment...and it is an awful punishment...reviled, marred beyond human resemblance, with stripes, despised, rejected. This is not a minor sprained wrist here. It is having been lashed and broken, infected with all the diseases of humanity, crushed with pain.

And he does it not because he expects glory, although Isaiah suggests that glory is in the offing, somewhere off in the distance. He does it simply because it is the only way to accomplish that which is necessary, the saving of a bunch of wayward people who are lost sheep, going every way but the right way. Sheep whom most shepherds would have written off. Stupid, distracted, confused, arrogant, misguided sheep, who do not count the cost of their meandering to those around him...the cost to the one who will gather them again...

...because someone, some One, is going to gather them in. And to do that requires more than a little effort. No, it is more than a mere walk up a hill whistling for some sheep. It is, in fact, like rescuing lost mountain climbers from a crevasse on Mt Everest. And in the rescue effort, the One who saves them will die, because it is only through him lifting them out of the crevasse, letting them climb onto his shoulders as he braces himself against the frozen walls, that they can climb out before he slips down into the darkness of death. He is the only one who can do it, even though he knows that he will die in the doing of it.

Who is this servant? Isaiah may or may not have considered his suffering servant in this poetic passage to be a prophecy of the one we know as Jesus, but our Lord certainly fits the picture that Isaiah paints. It makes a strange sense of the mystery that is Jesus' willingness to take on this pain. Why would Jesus – the son of God – not choose another less painful way to fix our waywardness?

Jesus accepts his ending because he knows it is the blood price for our iniquities, for our waywardness, for our sinful choices. He is the sacrifice. He is the one who was slain to redeem us from our sins. He is the one who knew exactly what he was getting into and said yes to it...

Because he loved us so much that he could not abandon us to our brokenness. He could not let us wayward sheep continue to meander through the cold night on the hillside without water or shelter. He could not let us fall into the crevasse of an eternity without relationship with the One who created us. And if his suffering and death was necessary to save us, he would die.

Isaiah sings "The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities." The two things are inextricably entwined. To make them righteous, he must bear their iniquities.

If they are to be brought back into the sheepfold, back to base camp, he has to suffer...and because he loves us, he freely chooses suffering as the tool of our salvation. A suffering that is humiliating as well as painful, one that marks him as a failure as well as a criminal, one that subjects him to injustice ...why?...so that we might have a justice that is more than we deserve.

Whether Isaiah knew he was writing about Jesus or not, we have no doubt that the evangelist John knew Isaiah's servant songs and realized, as he was writing, how Jesus' sacrificial death suddenly made sense.

This is God's way, the way that we lost sheep sometimes forget. Jesus was willing to be that suffering servant, simply to rescue us from ourselves, whether we deserve it or not, because this is what God's love requires. Not forcing Jesus to die for us, but asking that Jesus freely choose to die for us, because love is a free choice.

This night when we remember his death, we too have an opportunity to choose. Choose faithfulness. Choose righteousness. Choose love. Because in freely choosing love we show how we have learned from the gift Jesus gave us. We are the reason Jesus died. Given this gift, how can we do anything less than try to deserve it?

Amen.