

God, Suffering, and Christ's Cross

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If you've got suffering on your mind, then this morning offers a full dose of suffering in the divine drama of salvation, with the Servant Song in Isaiah, the Psalmist's prayer, and Jesus' reference to the cross in the Gospel of Mark. Each of these texts has its own independent history, but all of them underscore the undeniable truth that our God, and God's servants, are no strangers to the reality of suffering that plagues our world. In terms of natural disasters, several weeks ago it was another tsunami in American Samoa and earthquakes in Indonesia. In terms of geopolitical struggles, there have been more suicide bombers in the Middle East, and ever more plagues of hunger around Africa. In the terms of our personal lives right here at home, we marveled at Anna Mae Le Beau's sustained grace in battling declining health these last few months. She was the picture of grace under pressure right up until her very last breath; but none would deny the chronic pain she endured and the strength of will that was determined not to give in to the suffering she bore. Faith in God's promise to sustain us with His love does not mean that life will bring nothing but unbroken blessing and ceaseless joy. It didn't mean that for God's Servant in Isaiah. It didn't mean that for God's Servant in Christ. It doesn't mean that for God's servants among us.

The Cross chooses from among the many story lines in the Old Testament about the meaning of being chosen and the blessing of being saved. In choosing the Cross, Jesus makes that Servant Song in Isaiah the normative model of what that means. If you want to know what this means, then look at Jesus Christ, who made the event of the Cross central to his destiny, central to his ministry, central to understanding the meaning of the Gospel, central to taking on the mantle of discipleship, and entering into the mission of God's people. Now, let me be clear, I am no expert on suffering; but the truth is that God is, not simply because God is omniscient, a God who knows all things, but primarily because in Christ on the Cross we see a God who takes the suffering of the world upon Himself, bears it graciously, and transforms it from a sign of separation and judgment into the promise that there is nothing that can ever separate us from God's love. The Cross proclaims the Good News that God is indeed with us, always, without fail, come what may. This promise and this presence sustained Anna Mae. It sustained the Servant in Isaiah, and it sustained our Lord as he suffered and died on the Cross.

There were other Savior scenarios in the Old Testament. There was the *man of God* in Enoch, whose coming from the heavens would usher in the end of the age from one corner of the earth to the other, instantaneously. There was also the kingly *Son of David*, whose coming would restore Israel to its former glory leading the way with armies of unparalleled might. That was the scenario mapped out with Jesus' ascent to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. That was also the scenario that led Peter to ask on Ascension Day, "Lord,

is it at this time that you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6) But Jesus didn’t have that in mind. He had the Cross on his mind, in his life, directing his ministry, and defining what he took to be the mission of salvation. We have often projected these alternative images of the Messiah’s coming on to the future, at the end of the age, when Christ will really come in all his kingly glory. Hal Lindsay wrote a classic about it forty years ago, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and televangelists and radio preachers hammer home that message on a weekly basis. But my point is that Jesus chose the scenario that Isaiah described in his four Servant Songs, including its most famous stanza in today’s First Lesson from Isaiah 53.

James and John were still hoping that Jesus might change his mind, put on his superman suit, and restore the kingdom of Israel to its former glory, handing to them the honored seats at his right hand and left hand, signifying great power, prestige, and authority. “Master, grant us to sit one at your right hand and one at your left when glory-time begins.” (Mark 10:37). As it turned out, the rest of this text and the very structure of the Gospel of Mark make it clear that Jesus isn’t biting at this line. “You know that in the world, among the nations, those who are recognized as real rulers lord it over those who look up to them.” In today’s lingo, public servants, so-called, serve themselves, not the people. “Well, that’s not how it should be among you. Whoever wishes to become great must be a servant, and those looking to be first in line must become last of all.” (Mark 10:44) That’s what it means to be Chosen, whether we’re talking about Son of God, Son of David, or Son of Man. God’s Chosen are here to serve, not to be served. (Mark 10:45)

This is what Isaiah’s Servant Songs were all about. God’s people are called to lead by serving. Isaiah 53 is the Servant Song that spells out the connection between serving and suffering. If we look to the first Servant Song in Isaiah 42, there we see the primary theme of these songs, which spells out the connection between the promised messiah and God’s chosen servant: “Here is my Servant whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom I delight.” We read about God’s chosen servant in Isaiah 42:1-7, and 49:1-6, and 50:4-9, and 53. Again, as I said previously, there are many models in the Bible described for leading God’s people to the Promised Land. Moses, David, Elijah, great kings, mighty warriors, wise teachers. Jesus chose Isaiah’s Servant Songs as the key to understanding his mission, and ours.

There are many models in the world for leading folks to the land of great promise – some proposed by Christians in the name of Christ, others not. For instance, I ran across an odd story in the paper yesterday about a high-priced motivational speaker who was preaching the gospel of getting wealthy. James Ray is the son of a preacher from Tulsa, who was drifting through various jobs when he became a self-help speaker by packaging his charismatic personality with a can’t-miss program for becoming wealthy. Those who attend his seminars hear a motivational mantra that promises *Harmonic Wealth* – a dynamic package that makes use of new-age spirituality, Native American rituals, with some astrology and little numerology mixed in for good measure, all focused on

providing access to all aspects of wealth – financial, mental, physical, and spiritual. Those who enjoy the “free” seminars are recruited for a three-day \$4,000 *Quantum Leap*, or the week-long \$5,300 crash course in *Practical Mysticism*, and then the \$9,000 *Spiritual Warrior* retreat, which was the one covered in the paper, where there were over fifty persons in attendance, when two died on-site (and a third subsequently at the hospital) in an exercise that involved a make-shift sauna-like sweat lodge. Imagine the numbers for a moment: over fifty persons at \$9,000-plus per person, which adds up to around one-half million dollars! That’s two years of Zion Operating Budgets! Maybe I’m missing something. Hey, deacons: close the doors; turn up the heat; and pass the offering plates, please! My point is that lots of folks are looking for the promise land, and Mr. Ray was showing them a way – a way that was clearly not Christ’s way.

There are folks, whom I like and listen to, who also have the Gospel wrong. For instance, I heard on a radio talk show hosted by Dave Ramsey, who otherwise has many sound things to say about getting one’s financial house in order, proclaim that a biblical, New Testament foundation for building wealth calls for *conservative principles of diversification*. Conservative principles of diversification may lead to building wealth, or not, but what does that have to do with the Bible, the New Testament, or following Jesus? Another recent epiphany of a recurring theme in popular Christianity is found in Joel Osteen, whose secret to success is another version of Norman Vincent Peale’s *Power of Positive Thinking*. Again, there may indeed be power in positive thinking, and thinking positively may lead to success, or not; but what in the world, or in the gospels, does that have to do with Jesus? I am not equating new-age gurus like Jim Ray with Dave Ramsey and Joel Osteen, except in saying that none of these approaches to finding our way to the promise land has anything to do with Jesus, who in our Gospel this morning, and in his ministry on earth, chose the model of Isaiah’s Servant in laying out his way through the Cross to the promise of salvation and the call to service.

Again, as I said, there are many models for leading – in the Bible and in the world – with secrets to success and visions of what success means and looks like. Jesus chooses – and calls us to focus on – the Cross as the key to his call, as the meaning of his ministry and our mission in the world. In lifting up the Cross, Jesus offers a radically new vision for understanding what it means to be Savior and what salvation looks like. What is more, he offers a radically new vision of what God looks like and who God is. In lifting up the Cross as the way to salvation and the revelation of God, we can never see God, salvation, or even suffering in the same light again. What has often been regarded as a sign of separation from God has now become, once and for all, the promise that God is with us ... always. This is a radically revolutionary vision of God, a vision of God that is utterly unique to Jesus as the Christ. That was the Jesus who came to earth as the incarnation of God in flesh and blood some two thousand years ago. That is the Jesus who will return at the end of the age. That is the Jesus we’re called to follow today, as we try in some small way to show the world what it looks like to lift up God’s love by living as servants ... in Jesus’ name. Amen.