

PENTECOST 22

Proper 24 - Year B

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Note: During the 2024 Season after Pentecost, Sermons That Work will use Track 2 readings for sermons and Bible studies. Please consult our archives for many additional Track 1 resources from prior years.

Isaiah 53:4-12

⁴ Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases,
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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.

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with
affliction.
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.

¹¹ Out of his anguish he shall see;
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one, my servant, shall make many
righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.

¹² 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.

Commentary from Aidan Luke Stoddart

This well-loved passage is from the fourth of Isaiah's so-called "servant songs." It describes the tribulation and ultimate triumph of a suffering servant who enacts God's righteousness and salvation in the world. Christians typically read the servant as Jesus Christ. This interpretation goes back to the New Testament: in Acts 8, Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch discuss Isaiah 53:7-8 with reference to Jesus. And certainly, it is easy to see the resonance between the content of Isaiah 53 and the story of Jesus' passion. For instance, verse 7, "And he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth," will remind many readers of Jesus' silence when on trial in the synoptic Gospels. And of course, the phraseology of verse 11 will seem very rich indeed to anyone familiar with the various paradigms of Christian atonement theology: "He shall bear their iniquities."

But Christian readers must remember that to project Jesus onto this text is an *interpretive* move. The Christological reading of the suffering servant is not intrinsic to the text itself; there are other possible readings. For example, some Jewish thinkers have indexed the servant to Moses (see *Sotah* 14a in the Babylonian Talmud). Meanwhile, Isaiah himself seems to intend the servant as a symbol for Israel and its people (see 49:3). Jesus is only one interpretation.

Does this mean that it is wrong to read the suffering servant as Jesus? Not necessarily. This interpretive choice simply requires us to use our imaginations in order to infuse an old text with a newer meaning. In this vein, the preacher might explore how the Holy Spirit can inspire Scripture not only through the words themselves but through our creative interactions with those words. In short: did Isaiah mean to reference Jesus? Probably not. But does the Spirit speak to us about Jesus through Isaiah's words? This is certainly a compelling possibility, worthy of our prayerful reflection.

Discussion Questions

How does the servant song reflect the story of Jesus? In what ways does it contradict the life of Jesus? And what does it mean for someone to bear the iniquities of others?

Psalm 91:9-16

- ⁹ Because you have made the Lord your refuge, *
and the Most High your habitation,
¹⁰ There shall no evil happen to you, *
neither shall any plague come near your
dwelling.
¹¹ For he shall give his angels charge over you, *
to keep you in all your ways.
¹² They shall bear you in their hands, *
lest you dash your foot against a stone.
¹³ You shall tread upon the lion and adder; *
you shall trample the young lion and the
serpent under your feet.
¹⁴ Because he is bound to me in love,
therefore will I deliver him; *
I will protect him, because he knows my
Name.
¹⁵ He shall call upon me, and I will answer him; *
I am with him in trouble;
I will rescue him and bring him to honor.
¹⁶ With long life will I satisfy him, *
and show him my salvation.

Commentary from Aidan Luke Stoddart

Psalm 91 is an exciting text promising the protection of angels, the defeat of wild beasts, and divine deliverance from adversity. It's also one of the traditional psalms prayed at Compline, the Church's ancient office of night prayer. "You shall trample the young lion" may seem hardly the sort of promise that sends one off to a good night's sleep with a cup of chamomile, but we should remember that this dramatically violent language is ultimately meant to be comforting. At its core, this psalm is a simple promise that God will take care of all those who seek refuge in him; the God of Psalm 91 is a God who empowers us to triumph over the many wild dangers that beset us. These days, we don't tend to worry about literal lions or literal adders, but consider what these beasts might symbolize spiritually for us.

It is interesting to consider who is speaking in this psalm. At the beginning of the excerpt, the psalm seems to have a human voice; the Psalmist lectures his hearers about the saving deeds of God, speaking about God in the third person. But by the end of the Psalm, it seems that God himself is speaking in the first person: "Therefore will *I* deliver him." What do we make of this shift? Perhaps there is an implicit promise that when we speak *about* God, sooner or later we may find that *God is speaking about himself to us*.

Discussion Questions

What does it mean for God to be a refuge? And what sorts of dangers might lions and adders represent spiritually to modern readers?

Hebrews 5:1-10

⁵ Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ² He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness, ³ and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. ⁴ And one does not presume to take this honor but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

⁵ So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest but was appointed by the one who said to him,

“You are my Son;
today I have begotten you”;

⁶ as he says also in another place,

“You are a priest forever,
according to the order of Melchizedek.”

⁷ In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.

⁸ Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered, ⁹ and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, ¹⁰ having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Commentary from Aidan Luke Stoddart

Evidently, the author of Hebrews is obsessed with Melchizedek. He reads this figure from the Old Testament as a type for Christ, as one whose kingly priesthood points to Christ's own kingly priesthood. Incidentally, the Old Testament itself says very little about Melchizedek. He shows up briefly in Genesis 14 as a priest-king who blesses Abram and his God. And he is referenced once in Psalm 110, which Hebrews cites in today's reading: "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek." Frustratingly, the Psalmist never bothered to explain what on earth he meant by "the order of Melchizedek," but the author of Hebrews offers his own creative elucidation in today's text: he maps the priesthood of Melchizedek onto the life of Jesus. In Jesus' "reverent submission" and compassionate self-sacrifice on behalf of others, Jesus is living into a priesthood just like Melchizedek's priesthood.

This explanation certainly gives us some meat to put on the bones of Melchizedek's limited presence in the Old Testament. But by the same token, this explanation also allows the author of Hebrews to argue that the priestly work of Christ is not new, but very old: for the priesthood of Melchizedek predates the founding of Israel and the Levitical priesthood of Aaron. Hebrews is making the case that the Christ event is continuous with something very ancient, part of the slow work of God enacted through centuries and generations. It is not an interruption, but a continuation of a long salvation story.

Discussion Questions

How might we understand our own ministry in light of how Hebrews describes the priesthood of Christ?

Mark 10:35-45

³⁵ James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” ³⁶ And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” ³⁷ And they said to him, “Appoint us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” ³⁸ But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” ³⁹ They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized you will be baptized, ⁴⁰ but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to appoint, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

⁴¹ When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. ⁴² So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ⁴³ But it is not so among you; instead, whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Commentary from Aidan Luke Stoddart

It's hard to fault the sons of Zebedee for their zeal, but this passage reveals them to be more than a bit woolly-headed. They come to Jesus asking to be glorified with him, one on his right and one on his left. They still see the reign of Jesus as mimicking human paradigms of power and authority. They expect Jesus to be an authoritarian Lord, and they want to be his vicegerents, his seconds-in-command. But they are missing the point. All the more embarrassing for them, given that, literally *just* before this excerpt, Jesus explained to his disciples that he would be mocked, tortured, and then killed by the imperial authorities. It seems that James and John were unable to hear this. Perhaps they ignored Jesus when he foretold his death; perhaps they misunderstood him, perhaps they were in denial. Whatever the case, in this scene, they come to Jesus assuming that his glory entails power. Jesus, however, shows that glory is found in weakness and humility: “Whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

In the end, in Mark's Gospel, there are indeed two people who are at Jesus' side in glory. But they aren't two disciples lording it over all the others. They aren't even two saints. They are rather two bandits crucified next to Jesus, unwittingly close in their powerlessness to the foolish glory of his cross. God's logic of power is so drastically different from our own.

Discussion Questions

How do members of the Church today find themselves reflected in the power-hungry aspirations of James and John? How can we, instead, seek the glory of being last, the glory of servanthood, the glory of the cross?