

One of Us
Isaiah 53: 1-10

Thursday it rained, really rained. As I drove back into the village that morning, I was jarred by the sight of someone riding a bicycle. It is mid-January, I was wearing only a rain jacket and not a winter coat, and people were participating in decidedly non-winter activities. Sandwiched between the beautiful challenges of the most recent snowstorm and the unknown of the winter months ahead were these days that seemed so incongruous, so out of place with what we expect for the season. Somewhat like this text from the prophet Isaiah. Coming on the heels of the Christmas story and the inspiring story of Jesus' baptism that launched him into a ministry of teaching, healing, and showing us all what it means to love and be loved, this dark and foreboding text does not match the excitement of Jesus' time on earth with its miracles and thought-provoking lessons. We want more time with those inspirational stories, we want more words of comfort, we want the beautiful glory of Christmas and Easter that makes us feel so good.

It is a troubling text on many levels. Words have multiplicities of meanings. There are multiple transitional dilemmas from section to section. Its overall message is ambiguous, dependent upon individual perspective. While Christians view it as a text that clearly speaks of the sufferings of Jesus, in Judaism it is understood as portraying the persecution of the Jewish people through the ages. It is no wonder then that when the Ethiopian eunuch read this same passage as he rode along the road to Gaza he was perplexed. In the recounting of the Acts of the Apostles, Philip, one of those who followed Jesus in the early days of the church in Jerusalem, began with this reading from the prophet Isaiah to "proclaim ... the good news about Jesus."¹ Good news? I must have missed something, for it is almost impossible to hear *any* good news in this text! Despised, rejected, stricken, afflicted, wounded, crushed, anguish, iniquities - frightening words that do not at all ring of good news. Yet these ominous images of what is known as Isaiah's suffering servant *are* the crux of the gospel, *the* good news. They are the essence of Emmanuel, God with us, the incarnation. They are why we are here today. They

¹ Acts 8: 35 NRSV

are the "ugly beauty of God's ultimate act of reconciliation."² In that Christmas story we hold so dear God became one of us, not as an exalted person removed from the hardships of living, but truly one of us. Through Jesus God gets what it means to be human. Out of the ashes of persecution and horror rose God's hope for healing and wholeness, for peace, or as wrapped up in one word in Hebrew, shalom. It was not an act of reconciliation achieved through imposition of power or through intricate negotiation but through the full embracing of the human experience - from birth to death in the most unglamorous life of a poor itinerant teacher who spent more time on the fringes of society and who was killed for treason:

He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering² and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces - he was despised, and we held him of no account.³

And that is the good news.

Tomorrow is the day we celebrate the life and legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr, a modern man after the manner of the Old Testament prophets who railed against oppression and injustice, who reminded people time and time again that to choose inaction was to choose the side of evil, and who encircled it all with billowing blankets of hope that the world could instead be a reflection of God's kingdom. He did not hide from the hideous and terrifying hatred that only increased as he traveled and spoke throughout the world. Rather he called all the ugliness by name, even embracing it because only in acknowledging it could it be obliterated. In a sermon he preached just hours before he was murdered, Dr. King said, "But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough can you see the stars."⁴ As prophets do, he saw the stars, the presence of God that shimmered through the riots, the cross burnings, the beatings, the arrests, to reveal the reality of the hope that we are all God's children and that we can indeed be part of the creation of a world in which we are all considered God's own. That is the nature of faith itself. Even at its shakiest, faith continues to defiantly sing of hope because

² Mark S. Gignilliat in www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1213

³ Isaiah 53: 2b-3 NRSV

⁴ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. *I've Been to the Mountaintop*. April 3, 1958, Memphis, TN. www.americanrhetoric.com.

God has become one of us. Because God knows and knows well the struggles, the anguish, and the uncertainty of living in a world that appears indelibly marked by wounds created by ourselves and by forces beyond our control, we can proclaim the good news that God-with-us still breathes new life and hope. It was the dream of the prophets who watched their worlds crumble around them yet still believed God would prevail. It was the dream of the disciples whose friend and leader had been horribly killed but chose to follow a powerful love that went beyond death. It was the dream of Dr. King who faced and named the angry prejudices of society with the joyous hope that freedom, justice, and unity would one day shape our interactions with one another. It is still our dream today. It is not an impossible dream but one made reality because God is with us, because God truly knows the full complexity of living in all its myriad and sometimes terrifying manifestations.

I am not one of those courageous prophets. I am not one of those daring disciples. I am certainly no Dr. King. I am me - someone who struggles with feelings of inadequacy and powerlessness, someone who has trouble seeing beyond the lonely and biting words of this text to discover the hope of Messiah, someone who gets tired of the turmoil and hatred. But I can lean back into the story of faith, one that seesaws through conflict and tragedy too great to grasp, one that is often beyond my ability to understand, one that grounds me in the assurance that it always comes back to the good news of God's hope, a hope that is available to all, a hope in which we can all participate.

This past week I read a beautiful article about President Obama's faith, one that has often mirrored a rhetoric much like that of Dr. King's, one that he has demonstrated as he has faced tragedy after tragedy in vile, senseless, hateful shootings that have so permeated our lives. I know well the weight of the privilege of sharing death with others, of celebrating and mourning lives lived and lost. I cannot imagine doing it for a nation. Yet he did, time and time again, diving into the dark waters of despair, drawing on his faith that there is more to who we are as God's creation than the violence. When he gave the eulogy for the Rev. Clementa Pinckney, pastor of the Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston and one of nine victims of that horrific shooting, Obama spoke of grace. In the middle of all the grief and anguish and anger, grace. He took the Biblical story, the story of all life, and circled it

back to God and God's hope. He said, "As a nation, out of this terrible tragedy, God has visited grace upon us, for he has allowed us to see where we've been blind. He has given us the chance, where we've been lost, to find our best selves."⁵ The good news again. The good news.

The story in the Acts recounts Philip explaining this good news to the Ethiopian who was so confused and yet so hungry to learn more. If they continued in the scroll of Isaiah, one of the next passages they would have encountered is a reflection of this rhythm of despondency and hope - with God's hope always having the last word. "For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you."⁶ Because of God's compassion, God's feelings for us, God's feelings in solidarity with our own, our hope is assured. Because God connected to us through Christ, we can make our way through the rejections, the name-calling, the hatred thrown out, even the violence. When we see the worst in us, we can also see the chance to find our best selves. *We know what's on the other side* - and it's not the eve of destruction but the dawn of new life. Moreover, because of God's compassion for us, we can have compassion for one another, for all the world, and we can be that same good news in how we live, in what we say, what we do, in who we are.

That is what happens when we take our place alongside the community of believers. We learn that it necessarily takes us beyond ourselves, beyond the misery that may surround us, beyond the walls of privilege that protect us, to become hope for others. Just as God chose to become one of us in Jesus and to live as one despised and rejected, one ultimately killed for loving the wrong people, and one who became hope and light for the world, so can we become the reality of hope for the world. We can choose to change, to move the rhythm of the world one step closer to God's kingdom. As President Obama said in his eulogy for Rev. Pinckney, we can become expressions of God's grace. That is the good news and our ultimate hope - that the grace of God takes root in our hearts and goes out to the world.

⁵ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/06/26/remarks-president-eulogy-honorable-reverend-clementa-pinckney>

⁶ Isaiah 54: 10 NRSV

This 53rd chapter of Isaiah is one of piercing images that are disturbing. To say that God's servant - be it the prophet, Jesus, a nation, or anyone at all - would necessarily suffer and be so horribly rejected is not something we want to hear, much less experience. But to deny God's humanity is to deny our own humanity. It disavows the reality that God is fully present with us in *all* times. It does not acknowledge the hopeful grace of God that will lead us to a world in which justice, freedom, and peace *are* the practice. Simply put, it does not give God credit for being God if we ignore or dismiss the torment of others, even ourselves. And it removes our responsibility of being agents of change, for moving the rhythm of life toward God's grace.

Whether it be weather that seems so out of sync, or scripture passages that are so disconcertingly despairing in contrast to the story of the good news, or life itself that is unpredictable and difficult when we want it to be otherwise, as believers we move through it all in the awareness that God is one of us, with us, in us, giving us opportunities to move and shape the world in expressions of God's grace, to shift the arc of the universe in the direction of God's kingdom. As God embraced all of humanity through Jesus, so do we look honestly at our own humanity. As God showed us love, grace, and hope through Jesus, so do we show love, grace, and hope to all. We are part of a movement, the shifting of creation away from our self-centeredness to what Dr. King called a "dangerous unselfishness", to the very kingdom of God.

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United Presbyterian Church
Sackets Harbor, New York
January 15, 2017