

# **“The Suffering Servant”**

**Good Friday**

**April 14, 2006**

Texts: Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 / Psalm 22:1-11 / Hebrews 10:1-25 / John 18:1-40;  
19:1-37

Our OT lesson this evening comes from the Book of Isaiah and speaks poignantly of the suffering servant. I think we are all acquainted with suffering -- it seems some more than others. There are really two basic kinds of suffering, and both are found in the Bible, and in our lives. The first kind of suffering is that which is caused by our own mistakes, our own missteps, our own sin. This kind of suffering, I would hazard to guess, is the most common. At least I know it is in my life. This is suffering due to the consequences of our actions. We knew whatever we did was wrong, and we may be (as the Prayer Book says) "heartily sorry for these our misdoings," but the consequences of our actions may still have to be played out. It is what may be called “just” suffering. But, unfortunately, we may also heap suffering on our selves and others.

There is, however, another type of suffering. I'd like to tell you a story about this other kind suffering. This story is not meant to glorify the sufferer -- God forbid -- but to point to another who suffered even more. By all accounts, Norma was quiet, even for a Norwegian, but she worked hard and she was a devout and pious Lutheran. She met a handsome, strapping young man of Irish and Welsh descent, Chuck, who was full of life and could plow straight furrows (quite a high compliment in those days). They were soon married and began working their own plot of 80 acres. They worked hard and were happy for the first few years out on

the farm. But, Iowa is a horribly haunting and dreary place in the winters. Especially in the winter, when work was slow, Chuck would meet up with the boys at the local beer hall -- occasionally he would have too many beers and come home drunk. I don't know whether he was abusive when he was drinking and I'm not sure I want to know, but a pattern began to form.

Norma continued to go to her local church and began praying for Chuck to attend with her -- Chuck had never attended church and had no inclination to go. The couple had a beautiful baby girl and several years later another. When the second child was one year old, Norma was stricken with polio. At the age of 28, she could no longer use her legs. This once beautiful and vibrant woman was now confined to a wheel-chair. Chuck's drinking got worse. Norma would often be left alone on the farm with her two small children while Chuck drank to his pity and sorrow. Norma learned to crawl into the basement to wash clothes, to keep a vegetable garden, even a flower garden, all without the use of her legs. And she continued to pray. Man, could she pray! Her prayers were desperate. She prayed for the salvation of her husband and her children. As she grew older and her children married, she prayed for the salvation of her grandchildren, and then her great grandchildren. She was a faithful servant to God all of her life, but her lot in life never changed. She was crippled the day she died. But her husband came to Christ -- rather late in life, but all the same he came. And what a dear soul in Christ he became. He became a saint. And if you asked him, how he got to be that way -- he would simply point to his wife and start to cry. Norma and Chuck were my grandparents.

Much of the hardship my grandma endured had already taken place when I came along. All I remember is a pair of Godly grandparents. But, it had not always been that way. My grandma's legacy is a family dedicated to the work of Christ. Yet, most of her life was filled with suffering. She was a suffering servant

of the Lord. In fact, I remember overhearing her pray once during her afternoon respite, "Thank you, Lord, for counting me worthy to suffer"! And it is important for you to know, as my grandma did, that you are never suffering alone. Christ is suffering with you.

You may know people like my grandma, too. People whose lives are filled with suffering, all or little of it caused by their own doing. And yet they suffer it cheerfully, for they know that Christ suffered for us and continues to suffer with us.

Yes, Christ himself knew about suffering. For he was the ultimate suffering servant. I had the opportunity to watch the movie "The Passion of the Christ" again this afternoon. Nobody who has seen that movie can say that Christ doesn't understand suffering. He gave His life for us, as Paul says, "even when we were still sinners." The perfect, unblemished, Son of the Living God died a horrible death for me, a pitiful sinner. There is a poignant scene in the movie where Mary meets up with Christ on the Via Dolorosa. He has just fallen, again. And He looks straight into His mother's eyes and says, "Look, mother, I am making all things new!" That includes you and me. That includes those who do not even yet know Him. Astonishing! And that is what this passage from Isaiah is all about.

I'd like to discuss how this OT prophet could, seemingly unknowingly, describe perfectly the life and character of Jesus Christ. Recall that these verses from Isaiah were written some 600 years prior to Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection. Israel is in bondage, captive in a foreign land. Much like we are captive in a foreign land called sin. The Israelites are far from their homeland and ruled by ungodly people. How could this be? How could the chosen people of God be yet again in captivity, far from home. It all seemed so hopeless. Where was their hope? Who was their hope? It would seem logical that Isaiah would pray and plead for a strong, powerful, war-like and conquering King. Instead,

Isaiah sees Israel's help, its deliverance coming from a meek servant. This depiction of the Messiah must have seemed strange to the people of Isaiah's time. In retrospect, though, through the eyes of Jesus, the depiction of the Messiah is quite apropos.

Isaiah, chapter 53, is considered the pinnacle of the OT witness to the Messiah, Jesus. It has been called the "bleeding heart of the OT" (MacRae, 1979). "No other passage from the OT was as important to the Church as Isaiah 53" (Joachim Jeremias, Eucharistic Words). NT writers quote 8 specific verses from this passage alone as having been fulfilled in Jesus.

Isaiah's description of the Messiah and His sacrifice are given in verses 5, 6, 7, and 11:

**Vs. 5, 6, 7 11:** *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 [the sinfulness] 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.*

*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.*

And, again, they are echoed in the apostle Peter's first letter (1 Peter 2:18-25):

<sup>18</sup> Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. <sup>19</sup> For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. <sup>20</sup> If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. <sup>21</sup> For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

<sup>22</sup> "He committed no sin,

and no deceit was found in his mouth."

<sup>23</sup> When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. <sup>24</sup> He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. <sup>25</sup> For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

Christ himself quotes from Isaiah, chapter 53 (Is. 53:12), on the night before His crucifixion. He says in Luke (22:37): "For I tell you that this which is written must be fulfilled in Me, '**And he was numbered with transgressors**'; for that which refers to me has its fulfillment." Christ must have known when he made this statement from the second half of the verse in Isaiah what the remainder of the statement was (you can follow along too in your pew Bibles)...'**yet he bore the**

**sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.'** He was to be numbered with the guilty so that we (the many) might be considered blameless through Him! Nowhere else in Scripture does Christ so definitively quote from this portion of Isaiah. He must have fully understood His role, that first Maundy Thursday evening, as one of substitutionary atonement -- as one perfect God-man dying for the sins of all who would believe in Him.

My prayer for you today is that if you are wandering for whatever reason, you will return to the shepherd, the guardian of souls. I hope you will find and be found by Him. Because by His sacrifice on Good Friday...He is making all things new! And that means you and me.

Because of our humanity, our fallenness, our separation from God, all of us will suffer. Until Christ comes again in Glory, there will be soccer games lost, boyfriends who dump you, husbands who forget anniversaries, marriages that end in divorce, car accidents that kill and maim, and diseases that disfigure. The question before us is, first, do we want to live lives that are constantly leading to our own suffering and that of others? Will our suffering be in vain, because of our own selfishness and rebellion against God, or will our suffering have purpose? Will we wallow in our pain and suffering, or will we seek to serve others in it? Let us all try to imitate the Great Suffering Servant, our One Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! And let us all know that Christ suffers with us -- he will not leave us and forsake us. Amen. Behold, He is making all things new!

*Amen.*

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