

Palm Sunday, Old Testament, Year C

THE ONE WHO SUFFERS WITH AND FOR US

Isaiah 50:4-9

Palm Sunday

Analysis by Cathy Lessmann

4The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens – wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught.

5The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. 6I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. 7The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame;

8He who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. 9It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty? All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.

DIAGNOSIS: He Suffers with Us

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Wearied by Suffering

"Life is full of misery, loneliness, and suffering—and it's all over much too soon," Woody Allen famously said. No one wants to suffer, but inevitably, everybody does. This third Suffering Servant poem by Isaiah is addressed to the Israelites miserable in exile. The speaker both *hears* (as in identifies with) and *speaks* to his peoples' weariness (think suffering (vv. 4-5)). Simultaneously, he also *hears* and *speaks* the Lord God's response. For that (namely, his identification with sufferers and his message) he is abused, insulted, and tormented (vv. 6-7). On top of that, he suffers shame and disgrace on account of that very suffering (vv. 7-8). *[Frank Yamada explains on the site Working Preacher that: "In group oriented societies, suffering is a source of shame for individuals and communities." See http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=437]*

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem: Usurping God

We can speculate that the Israelites didn't appreciate our speaker's message that The Lord God was behind and working through their suffering because, for one thing, that implied they were being critiqued and held accountable. Isn't that our gut reaction too? Heck, we too would rather not accept God's involvement in our suffering, thinking no way would God do that to *us*! Isn't God *always* good? Aren't we kinda-sorta-pretty good too, at least compared to real scum? And so we commit Adam and Eve's sin all over again (and over and over), making God in *our* image; usurping his position.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Eaten Up

When we are that wrong, if Yahweh is indeed critiquer-and

criticizer-in-chief and not us, then we end up the Lord God's adversary, guilty of insubordination for which "All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up" (v. 9). To rephrase that gorily but realistically: we end up lifeless bodies biodegraded by maggots. Eeessh. Sounds like hell.

PROGNOSIS: He Suffers for Us

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): The Word Suffers for Us

But notice: the Lord God is the one in charge here: The Lord God gives a special someone the ability to speak and listen (v. 4). The Lord God helps him (vv. 7, 9). the Lord God vindicates his suffering and shame (vv. 7-8). Today we recognize this incredible individual, the Lord God's Suffering Servant, his Word-come-alive-in-real-flesh, as Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus so identifies with the world's sufferers, us God-usurpers that he becomes culprit along with the rest of. He gets executed on a cross. You could say, hell-bent, Jesus went to hell. (Why? You ask...Answer: because that's where we are—it was the only way to get us out of there.) But then—trumpets please—the Lord God, approving and pleased with what Jesus does, re-vivifies his biodegraded body Easter morning. On that day, death was defeated, hell was assaulted and vanquished.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): The Weary Are Revived

This is an astonishing defeat—something no one could have thought up on her own. But even more astonishing is that Jesus'

vindication becomes our vindication as well when we do the only possible thing there is to do: hang on to him as tightly as possible. (We call this faith.) How can we know? Well, something about this to-hell-and-back excursion works a wondrous change in our ears and eyes (yes, hearts too), so much so that, like the Suffering Servant, we too are able to see and hear the Lord God's Word in a brand new way.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): The Revived Speak Out

Then, with such opened ears and eyes, we comprehend that we are not alone in our suffering, that the merciful Lord God in Jesus is right there with us, suffering together, getting us through, redeeming and vindicating us. That in turn activates our tongues (v. 4), and enables us to speak words of comfort and hope to the suffering around us. In fact, it so emboldens us that we can brave taking our own trips into hell – not because misery likes company, but rather because we have become involved in Jesus' merciful hell-extraction operation.