

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

HELP WANTED: A SUFFERING SERVANT

Isaiah 50:4-9a

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Analysis by Paul Jaster

*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?*

DIAGNOSIS: “Help!”

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Help Wanted*

Picture an ad. “Help wanted: A Suffering Servant. A silent servant-type willing to crawl down into the muck and mud of human sin and death and suffer them away. Requirements—unwavering obedience and trust in God. Pay and benefits—a hefty dose of ridicule and scorn. Caution—job may be hazardous to your health. Apply at the nearest cross.” Who in their right mind would ever apply for a job like that?!

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Help Wanting*

About 535 years before Christ, during days of exile, out of the cauldron of great suffering, a divinely-inspired prophet voiced a radical idea. Suffering was not “punitive” or “instructive” (like the sages thought). Suffering was “redemptive.” The suffering of God’s faithful ones leads to great healing. This is the “good news” articulated in Isaiah’s four “Suffering Servant” poems. The only thing is that no one wanted the job! No one stepped up to the plate to take on this great honor. This radiant thought is never mentioned again... NEVER! ...until Jesus comes around.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Helpless*

Apart from this odd-but-wondrous help from God, Isaiah says, people are left faint, weary, powerless, exhausted, humiliated, shamed, dis-spirited, dis-graced. In fact, those who reject this aid are opposed by God. God contends against them. God becomes the Adversary in God’s own court of law. And in the end, “all of them wear out like a garment” and “the moth will eat them up”

(Isaiah 50:9b).

PROGNOSIS: “The Lord God Helps Me”

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Jesus Takes the Job*

Jesus deliberately and intentionally took on the “Suffering Servant” job the day that Jesus said, “The Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:35). On the cross of Jesus, the very position which Isaiah posted was finally filled: “He was wounded for our transgression, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that makes us whole, and by his bruises we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5).

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *The Lord Helps Me*

Without the eyes of faith, we see in the crucified Jesus just another bruised and beaten man, crushed and crunched by a world-class impudent, intimidating system. But with the eyes of faith, we see in Jesus-the-Suffering-Servant what Isaiah saw: “The LORD GOD helps me!” Jesus is the Boss, the big Boss, God in human flesh and blood, taking the job that no one else wanted. Because of Jesus on the cross, the one who could have justly been an Adversary is graciously our Savior and Defender. “The Lord God helps ME!” This extremely rare, remarkable, first-person self-reference in Isaiah only goes to show how deeply “personal” it gets. What Jesus does, he does “for me.” (The same point Luther hammers home in his little catechism.) What good would it be if Jesus died a 1,000 times, if I did not believe he did it all “for me”?

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *I Sustain the Weary...with a Word*

And through it all, the Lord has “given me the tongue of a teacher”—the personal becomes the corporate—that I may know how

to sustain the weary with a word. God's Word. God's Mighty Word of promise. Preaching...in the best sense of that word. Bold, public preaching despite the costs, resistance, and opposition it can engender. Public proclamation that in declaring what Christ crucified has done offers succor, comfort, and consolation. This is the "job" of those who follow Jesus to the cross—his and their own.