



Catalog No. 1663

Isaiah 53:10-12

7th Message

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December 18, 2011

THE FOURTH SERVANT SONG (PT 3): THE LAST WORD, NOT TO MENTION THE SILENCE AFTER

SERIES: GREAT EXPECTATIONS

We often say that Christmas is the season for giving, but as I was reminded by a friend of mine this week, that's not true. Christmas is the season for receiving. Sadly, most of us get so caught up with giving that we miss the opportunity to receive the most precious gift God has given – Jesus.

Friday night I went to Stanford's Messiah Sing with my granddaughter Mary. I've been going the last several years, not because I can sing or even read music, but in response to an invitation of my friend, John Felstiner, who is passionate about classical music. John is a retired professor of English, poetry and Holocaust literature at Stanford. He and his wife Mary, also an award-winning author, have enriched my life immensely. Several years ago when they first invited me to the sing along, I said that I was too busy, but gave in when John replied, "How can you as a pastor be too busy to sing the Messiah with a Jew?" I haven't missed since. Stanford traditionally concludes their service with not one, but two renditions of the *Hallelujah Chorus* that never fails to bring heaven to earth. Upon leaving I once asked John, "Do you think such singing makes us most human?" "No," he replied, "it makes us divine."

The title for my message is taken from a line out of his book, *Paul Celan, Poet, Survivor, Jew*. Celan was a German-speaking East European Jew and is perhaps Europe's most compelling postwar poet. His most famous poem, "Todesfuge" ("Deathfuge"), articulates the unthinkable. "Not far from [his home town of] Czernowitz... an SS lieutenant ordered Jewish fiddlers to play a tango with new lyrics called "Death Tango," for use during marches, tortures, grave digging and executions. Then, before liquidating the camp, the SS shot the whole orchestra." This is "abomination that staggers belief—mass murder orchestrated, music gracing death."

Throughout the poem dark metaphors and pulsating cadences draw us deep into a black hole from which there is no escape – "abomination that staggers belief—mass murder orchestrated, music gracing death." And yet, out of the ashes the fugue ends on a name that resonates with hope – Shulamith (from the Song of Songs). "Darkened by ash, "Shulamith" ends the poem holding onto what Nazism tried to erase: a rooted identity. Archaic, inalienable, she has the last word, not to mention the silence after."¹

Isaiah's fourth servant song ends in similar fashion. Though the servant was led like a lamb to the slaughter and did not open his mouth, the Lord breaks the silence and has the last word regarding his servant. The servant who was stricken, smitten, afflicted, pierced, and crushed is suddenly alive and beholding his new family from his exalted seat of highest honor.

As I labored over these final verses of Isaiah's poem I found that, while the vocabulary is not extraordinary, the lines are so dense and the syntax so difficult, that it is extremely difficult to ascertain the correct reading of the text, not to mention the poem's meaning. Because of this you'll find no two translations are alike. With so much ambiguity built into the poem and little agreement among scholars,

I found myself a bit stressed with the responsibility of conveying its significance to you in a thirty minute sermon.

But the more I meditated on the poem and pondered its intricacies, the more I was captured in awe by its sheer beauty, and felt less the need to remove its ambiguity. It reminded me of my first experience in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, home to famous paintings of the Impressionists – Cezanne, Gauguin, Manet, Matisse, Monet, Renoir, Van Gogh. When the impressionists first appeared on the scene they were criticized for abandoning the traditional rules of painting that insisted on precise and exact contours and flat colors to achieve a realistic mirror of life. Instead they adopted new techniques of using short, thick strokes of paint to capture the essence of the subject, and colors were applied side-by-side, rather than mixed, which created a vibrant surface. If you stand too close to the painting, the definition and contours of the subjects are lost; but when you create some space and view the painting from different angles, the subjects are imbued with an energetic beauty that seems to jump off the canvas.

Such is the poem. The Hebrew poets used language in fresh, innovative ways to lead us into new worlds and new ways of looking at life. Though the images they depict are opaque and mysterious, they ignite the imagination and capture the truth-seeker in wonder and awe that promotes faith. You can hardly take a step onto this high plateau of Isaiah's poetry without losing your breath. One commentator concluded, "Interpretation may legitimately cease in awe, refusing to decode the imagery, because we are very close here to what seems to be quintessential holy ground."²

We have the benefit of hindsight knowing who the servant is and what he accomplished to help us interpret the poem, but Isaiah's audience did not. On this final Sunday of Advent I thought it would be appropriate to give you a taste of how Isaiah's impressionistic imagery struck his audience in awe.

The Outline: The Last Word, Not to Mention the Silence After

The Father's Delight (v. 10)

The Servant's Satisfaction (v. 11)

The Servant's Everlasting Honor (v. 12)

The phrase that links all three verses and gives the stanza cohesion is "*his soullife*." This poses the question, Given what the servant and God did with "*his soullife*," what are you going to do with his life?

I. The Father's Delight - To Save Us

Yet the Lord desired to crush him; he has put him to grief;
if you/she make his soul a guilt offering,
he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;
the desire of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.
(Isa 53:10 my translation)

A. The Lord's Delight in Us!

Whenever we experience severe or unjust suffering, we long for an explanation that will shed light in the darkness and give meaning to our plight. As the preacher (*Qohelet*) of Ecclesiastes observed rampant oppression and lack of justice of his day, he sought for such an explanation, but came up short of a satisfying solution.

I saw the tears of the oppressed—
and they have no comforter;
power was on the side of their oppressors—
and they have no comforter. (Ecc 4:1)

For *Qohelet*, injustice is just the way life is “under the sun.” Trying to discern its “eternal significance” is as elusive as chasing the wind, so you might as well resign yourself to it and get on with your life. “Not so,” says Isaiah. The tortuous and grievous pain laid upon the Lord's servant was not an accident of history or cruel twist of fate. While the immediate cause of his tragic fate can be attributed to the evil intentions of Israel's rulers, Judas' greed and betrayal, and a Roman procurator with no moral backbone, the ultimate cause was the sovereign hand of the Lord.

Principle: If you are in Christ, you are the Lord's servant and no matter what your lot has been, the Lord has the last word and will give every ounce of your suffering eternal significance (2 Cor 4:17).

The verse is framed by the “Lord's desire” or “delight” (*haphatz* – “to wish, will, desire, be pleased to, delight”). Its first occurrence is shocking – “But the Lord *desired/delighted* to *crush* him.” How do you put those two together? Like Celan's “Death fugue” – how can you conceive of putting Bach together with death? The thought of “delighting to crush” brings revulsion to any parent. Many translations remove the emotional aspect of the term and translate it as “the Lord's *will*,” hoping to make the pill a little easier to swallow. I seriously doubt, however, that Isaiah's audience was able to dilute the full force of its meaning. I suspect the tension is deliberate on Isaiah's part, for it forces the reader to ponder terrible questions that threaten the character of God. How could a gracious God inflict unjust suffering on someone who is innocent? Especially when we see that the servant dies in ignominy. What could possibly be worth all that? It had to have been something of monumental proportions.

The answer is given in the second half of the verse. It was because the Lord *delighted* to save us. The poet could have said, “It caused the Lord unspeakable grief to crush his son.” But, like a parent who sacrifices everything to save a son or daughter from death, the “delight” in the rescue so far outweighs the sacrifice (from the parent's viewpoint), the cost is never mentioned. The apostle John may have had this verse in mind when he penned the most famous verse in his gospel.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

God's “delight” in us is now described with that wonderful word, “love,” and “crushed” is softened to “gave.”

B. Our reparations have been fully paid!

When the “life” of the servant is offered as a guilt offering, God's purpose is fulfilled in saving us. The function of the guilt offering was compensation for the damages caused to the offended party and in God's case, for violating his holiness. When we sin, we not only fall short of God's righteous standard, we also inflict relational damage upon God and others. Wenham observes “The reparation

offering draws attention to the fact that sin has both a social and a spiritual dimension.”³

The death of the servant satisfies both, to alleviate our guilt before God and the cost of the damages due to God. The result is that we must no longer live with that dreadful need to compensate God with some kind of sacrifice for our failures. What great news!

But the servant's offering must be accepted to be effective. The subject of the verb *sim* (“put,” “set,” “place,” “appoint”) in the second line is somewhat ambiguous (either 3rd person feminine singular, or 2nd person masculine singular) and can be read three different ways (back to our impressionistic art form), each with astonishing emphasis.

If it is the first, it makes “his soul” (fem.) the subject and emphasizes the servant's willingness and whole-hearted commitment to intervene as a guilt offering for us. In Isaiah 50:7 the servant says “I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame.” Amazing love, how can it be?

If it is 2nd person, two possibilities occur. First, the subject could be “the Lord,” “when you [O Lord] make his life...” drawing attention to the fact that “the Lord, who alone knows what reparation is required, delights in his servant as the one who fully meets the need.”⁴ This is how the TNIV translates it.

Or the subject could be “you.” Though the second person singular has not been used thus far in the poem, its force is striking. Isaiah's ambiguity has forced the seeker of truth to wander down the many paths of possibilities, even down the path of the unexpected singular “you”! Suddenly, at least for a moment, we can no longer watch from a safe distance. “The prophet has been gently drawing us in with the inclusive ‘we’ and ‘us’... But now the prophet looks us straight in the eye and suggests that we can no longer hide from the issue in comfortable anonymity.”⁵

We are forced to feel the weight of responsibility to embrace the servant for ourselves. Confronted with a choice, we cannot remain neutral.

Whichever reading you prefer, Motyer encourages us to see that “Each interpretation in turn has a real color of suitability, and since Isaiah left it like that so must we.”⁶

C. The servant's new family and everlasting influence

When the servant's sacrifice is accepted wondrous things are set in motion. The one whose life was unjustly cut off from the land of the living, will “live” to see his descendants – “he will see his seed.” Far from being childless, he will have children across the planet (54:1-3), and will have endless time to enjoy them – “he will prolong his days.” With the possible exception of Psalm 23:6, Motyer points out, this phrase is always used “with reference to the prolongation of earthly life. Its use here, referring to one who died is unparalleled.” I wonder what this imagery would have done to the expand the exiles' worldview, and it doesn't end there! The head of this new family will have everlasting influence – “and the desire of the Lord will be accomplished in his hand.”

He who was crushed under the will of the Lord lives as the executor of that will. In 14:9-17 Isaiah depicted earth's royalty in Sheol, clutching their now meaningless dignities...with their pretensions in life exposed as pitiable foibles. Death has dethroned them. In the case of the Servant, however, death ushers him into sovereign dignity

and power, with his own hand administering the saving purposes of the Lord.⁷

In just one verse Isaiah has blown apart the exiles' expectations of what the success of the Lord's servant would look like and expanded their framework of its fulfillment beyond the horizon of history.

II. The Servant's Satisfaction - In Seeing Us Saved (Isa 53:11)

**Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
make many righteous,
for their iniquities he himself shall bear. (v. 11)**

In verse 11 the focus shifts from the "Lord's delight" to the servant's supreme satisfaction in saving us. In the second servant song the servant lamented that he had "labored in vain and spent my strength for nothing and vanity" (49:4). But now after apparent failure, the servant beholds his new family, physically healthy and spiritually whole and is overcome with emotion. As any parent can tell you, when you see your children emerge from the hospital after life-threatening surgery, it doesn't matter what the cost, it was worth it.

Next we are told what the servant accomplished with his "knowledge" – "The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous." John Oswalt grapples with its startling significance.

The statement is startling in both its simplicity and its daring. This man by what he has done will make people righteous! It is not difficult to understand why he should be declared the Righteous One...But how can he make many become righteous? The entire book has been about the persistent sin and unbelief of the chosen people, not to mention the world at large. This man will change all that in a sentence?⁸

The answer is yes! In his epistle to the Romans the apostle Paul expands Isaiah's image of a family to a new human race with Jesus as its head:

Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. (Rom 5:18-19)

However, for some of us this image of a whole new family runs roughshod over our experience. Christmas is a time of joy but it is also a time when pain is accentuated – if you are single, or divorced, or if you have lost a family member, or if you are unemployed or barren – by anything that makes you feel as if you are on the outside looking in. What does the servant do for those who feel left out?

One of my favorite texts in Scripture is the story related in Acts 8 about Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch. God told Phillip to get up and go south to the desert road that runs down from Jerusalem to Gaza. When he got there, there was the Ethiopian eunuch, the chief financial officer of the Queen of Ethiopia, who was in charge of her whole treasury. He is a non-Jewish black man from Africa, and he is sitting in his chariot, reading from a Jewish scroll of Isaiah 53.

As a eunuch he could never become a proselyte to Judaism, because he was castrated. According to Jewish law he would always remain on the outside. But there was something about the Jewish God and the Jewish way of life that had attracted him, a wonderful oasis of clean, calm wisdom in the midst of Roman decadence and immoral mystery religions. Like many, he was benefiting from the simple truth of Scripture – it was like living water to him – but he

needed help to understand it. He needed a teacher, so God sent him Phillip.

Phillip climbs up onto the chariot and asks the eunuch if he knows what he is reading, and the eunuch replies that of course he doesn't because he has no one to explain it to him. Then the eunuch asks a key question that scholars still wrestle over: Was the prophet Isaiah writing about himself or someone else? Luke reports that from this text, Phillip preached Jesus to the eunuch. He didn't just offer a string of 'proof texts.' Instead, Phillip told him how Israel's story, from Abraham through the prophets, was reaching its climax in a servant who had come to accomplish God's will.

Now consider this eunuch, who feels cut off, outside the circle as both a foreigner and a eunuch. They get to Isaiah 56 and Phillip tells him how Israel's story is reaching its climax in the servant – one through whom, "the long night of Israel's exile would arrive at its new dawn, with it the promise of blessing for the world, of a new covenant (Isaiah 54) and a new creation (Isaiah 55) – and, with that, a blessing even for outsiders and foreigners, and yes, even eunuchs (Isaiah 56)."⁹

**Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say,
"The Lord will surely separate me from his people";
and let not the eunuch say,
"Behold, I am a dry tree."**

For thus says the Lord:

**"To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,
I will give in my house and within my walls
a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off. (Isa 56:3-5)**

How would you feel if you were that eunuch? He is a foreigner too, having just come from Jerusalem, but he didn't get the gospel message there, in the Holy City; he hears it in the desert where the Spirit is present with Phillip.

And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord...

**"these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples." (Isa 56:3-5)**

He is accepted. Included. The eunuch is so excited he asks whether anything prevents him from being baptized right then and there, and Phillip replies, "Nothing."

So the first non-Jew to come to faith and baptism in Luke's great story is a black man from Africa, a eunuch who is better than a son and a daughter. Welcome to the family.

III. The Servant's Everlasting Honor - For Saving Us (Isa 53:12)

**Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,
because he poured out his soul to death
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and makes intercession for the transgressors. (v. 12)**

Now we come to God's final word regarding the servant. Because of his faithful and sacrificial obedience in submitting to a shameful death, he is granted supreme honor. The imagery of dividing the spoil after a crucial and decisive victory was familiar to Israel. It was originally used of the Lord's triumphal march into Jerusalem after the conquest of the land.

**You ascended on high,
leading a host of captives in your train
and receiving gifts among men, even among the rebellious,
that the Lord God may dwell there. (Ps 68:18)**

Now the imagery is applied to the humble servant and he is exalted to the highest rank alongside the "many" and "strong." This was standard Old Testament theology that was first voiced by Hannah, when God gave her a son after years of barrenness, and later it became the basis for Mary's song, "The Magnificat."

**He has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty. (Luke 1:52-53)**

If servant's exaltation "*with* the many" and "*with* the strong" seems unsatisfying to you, you'll be delighted that our *impressionist* poet has once again left the door open for an alternate reading, where the "many" and the "strong" can also be read as the object of the servant's spoil.

**I will apportion to him the many,
and the strong he will apportion as spoil.**

With this reading we are awestruck that "the servant has received as his own all those ('the many') whom he died to save, and that he is really King of kings."¹⁰

Such honor may have seemed extreme for Isaiah's audience, but that is how the apostle Paul interprets it, so that the servant reigns supreme; he has no rivals. His exaltation is nothing less than occupying the very throne of the Yahweh.

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:9-11)

Conclusion:

Reflecting on the poem, I detect a certain shyness and overriding humility in the Lord and his servant. Both of them refuse to call attention to themselves, and both resolutely refuse to give voice to the terrible price each of them paid for our redemption, lest we respond out of pained guilt or legalistic obligation. It is their love for us and delight in us that they persistently put forward as their overriding emotion towards us. That said, the last and final word is the Father's voice giving all glory to his Son for what he did, which is where the poem leaves us – with Jesus.

May you receive him.

1 John Felstiner, *Paul Celan, Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 28-41.

2 Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66* (WBC; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 149.

3 Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 111.

4 J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 439.

5 John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, Chapters 40-66 (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 401.

6 Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 440.

7 Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 440.

8 Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 404.

9 N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone Part 1* (Louisville: Westminster, John Knox Press, 2008), 135.

10 Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 443.