

Was There No Other Way?

Isaiah 52:13—53:12

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church

1001 W Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616

Good Friday – April 14, 2017

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Isaiah 52:13-53:12 (NIV)

¹³ See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. ¹⁴ Just as there were many who were appalled at him— his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness— ¹⁵ so will he sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand.

¹ Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? ² He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. ³ He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. ⁴ Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. ⁷ He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. ⁸ By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken. ⁹ He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.

¹⁰ Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. ¹¹ After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light [of life] and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. ¹² Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Was There No Other Way?

Are you familiar with the legend of the robin? According to this tale the robin was originally a little brown bird. That is, until Good Friday — the FIRST Good Friday. On that dark day this little brown bird saw a man nailed to a cross, slowly dying.

He was all by Himself, and there was no one to help Him. The little brown bird began trying to free the man from the cross. The bird flew around and around until he found a way to remove a thorn from

the crown of thorns that circled the man's head, and in removing the thorn the little robin stuck himself. And the diving back and forth to the nails and to the thorns on the man's head, the little brown robin got his little breast all red with blood, and since then he has been known as the bird with the red breast.

It's just a legend, of course. But it reminds us of the seriousness of this day.

The prophet Isaiah tried to prepare us for Good Friday. Hundreds of years before Christ's birth Isaiah wrote, "He was despised and rejected — a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces He was despised, and we held Him in low esteem. Surely He took up our pain and bore our suffering — He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on Him, and by His wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all (53:3-6)."

Welcome to this commemoration of Good Friday, a day when we focus our minds and hearts on Christ's suffering and death for the sins of the world.

Sir John Bowring understood the meaning of the cross. Bowring was a leading man of his time. He was twice elected to Parliament. He spoke five languages. He was knighted by the queen. He was governor of Hong Kong. He wrote thirty-six books ranging from religion to politics. Yet all that we have from his pen is a poem he wrote, a poem set to music, a poem that has become a hymn. He wrote it as he sailed along the China Coast. He passed Macao, where an earthquake had leveled the city, and there he saw the ruins of a mission church. The cross which had stood atop the chapel now stuck out of the ruins of the city. Musing on that mental image, Bowring wrote these lasting words: "In the cross of Christ I glory/ Tow'ring o'er the wrecks of time." The cross does tower over the wrecks of time.

George Buttrick once wrote, "The magnetism of the Cross so strangely persists as to indicate a miracle. For why should anyone today trouble himself about a peasant hung in an obscure land many centuries gone?" It is because we see, and we understand, that Christ died on our behalf. The very Son of God gave His life for us.

But was it really necessary? Was there no other way? Theologians have pondered that question through the centuries with few satisfying answers. However, a few moments calm reflection will reveal that, indeed, there was no other way.

FOR ONE THING, JESUS COULD NOT ASK HIS DISCIPLES TO PAY A GREATER PRICE THAN HE WAS WILLING TO PAY.

Think of Stephen as the stones rip his flesh, and Peter as he dies crucified upside down. Many of the followers of Jesus were burned as torches in Nero's gardens, or torn apart by wild animals in the gladiator's arena. Only a soft, sentimental unrealistic faith would conjure the supposition that there was any other way for Jesus but the way of the cross. This is a hard world. The affluence and security of our land shelter us from that truth. Many people through the ages have given their lives for what they believe.

Melvin L. Cheatham, a medical missionary, tells an extraordinary story from his service during the war in Bosnia. He was assisted by a local doctor, Dr. Josip Jurisic, as he operated on a soldier of the Bosnian Muslim Army. The soldier had been shot through the neck and was paralyzed from the neck down. In removing the bullet that had shattered his spine, Dr. Cheatham found it had blown his spinal cord in two and knew he would remain paralyzed for the rest of his life.

The soldier had not been breathing very well when he arrived at the hospital. Knowing that because of paralysis of his chest muscles he would continue to have difficulty breathing after the surgery, they left the tube in his airway, placing him on a ventilator to help him breathe. The ventilator was powered with an electrical generator using diesel fuel because the hospital had electric power only intermittently.

The next morning as they made their rounds, Dr. Jurisic took Cheatham aside to a quiet corner where it was safe to talk and told him the bad news about the paralyzed soldier. "During the night the supply of diesel fuel ran out," he said, "the generator quit working, his ventilator stopped, and he could not breathe on his own, so he died."

Naturally Cheatham was sad, but what Dr. Jurisic said next stunned him and caused him to tremble all over. "Professor," Josip said, "Because it was you who operated on the soldier and he died, I fear his people will come for you and will kill you. Therefore, I have changed the medical record. I have erased your name as the surgeon, and I have written my name in place of yours."

For a long moment Cheatham says he looked into the eyes of this compassionate man. His throat became dry and he could feel a large lump forming. Finally he said to Dr. Jurisic, "But surely, my friend, that means they will come for you and will kill you."

Dr. Jurisic said quietly, "You can leave this place of war, and I cannot. I am prepared to die in your place, if I must, in order that you might live."

Dr. Melvin Cheatham says, "When I looked at this physician, holding the report with his name in place of mine, I thought of the Great Physician, Jesus Christ, who was willing to take my place and die for me on the cross."

It may be that the scandal and tragedy of our land and our times is that there is nothing for which people will give their lives. We are so accustomed to comfort and convenience that it would be very difficult for many of us to pay the ultimate penalty for our faith. This may be the first reason that Jesus had to die. He could not ask His disciples to pay a greater price than He was willing to pay.

There is a second reason why there was no other way.

WITHOUT THE CROSS YOU AND I COULD NOT SEE THE DESTRUCTIVENESS OF SIN.

Sin hurts. Sin destroys. The word sin has almost disappeared from our vocabulary, but the consequences of sin will forever haunt our world.

During the Franco-German War two shells fell close to a house near the scene of a major conflict. The owner decided to keep them as a curiosity. After polishing them, he put them near his fireplace. One day he showed these interesting objects to a visiting acquaintance. His friend was suddenly struck by a horrible thought. “What if they’re still loaded?” he inquired in alarm. Being an expert in such matters, he quickly examined the shells. “Get them away from the heat of the fire immediately!” he suddenly exclaimed. “They’re as deadly as the day they were made!”

So it is with sin! It is deadly! It can kill bodies, it can kill marriages, it can kill a church, it can kill a soul! An unknown author put it like this: “Sin steals joy. Sin removes confidence. Sin brings guilt ... Sin quenches God’s Spirit. Sin brings physical damage ... Sin causes an ache in the soul. Sin breaks God’s heart. Sin opens the door to other sins. Sin produces fear. Sin makes me its slave. Ask yourself, ‘Is this a price I really want to pay? Is this a price I can afford to pay?’”

Sin took God’s only Son and crushed His body. Jesus was only 33 when He died upon Calvary’s cross. Think of that — 33, a very young man! Falsely accused, bitterly reviled and yet guilty of no wrong. A healer and helper, a lover of little children, a liberator of people imprisoned by their own sin and guilt, a man who knew God intimately enough to address Him as “Abba,” Daddy, and yet never lost His concern for the least and the lowest. Yet there He hangs on the cross of Calvary, and it was sin that put Him there — your sin and my sin! That’s what sin is! That’s what sin does!

Would I be wrong if I said that many of us are like Celia, the young society leader in T.S. Eliot’s play *The Cocktail Party*? Celia is talking to a psychiatrist named Reilly. She is confessing that she has discovered a sense of sin in her life. Sin is not a familiar word to her. She explains that her upbringing had been “pretty conventional.” She had always been taught to disbelieve in sin. “Oh,” she says, “I don’t mean that it was never mentioned! But anything wrong, from our point of view, was either bad form, or was psychological.”

That’s true of many of us! For far too many, sin is a meaningless term, it is merely bad form or a petty peccadillo. We do not perceive that there is an enemy within our gates, a betrayer in our hearts, a demon within our consciousness that can bring inconceivable tragedy into our lives. We chuckle when someone sings, “I was sinking deep in sin. ‘Whoopee!’”

The cross shows us that sin is no casual matter! Sin is the enemy of our bodies, of our marriages, of our relations with one another and with God. There was no other way for God to show us that except on Calvary.

But there is one more reason why there was no other way but the cross.

THERE WAS NO OTHER WAY FOR GOD TO SHOW THE DEPTH AND THE WIDTH OF HIS LOVE EXCEPT BY THE GIFT OF HIS SON.

John puts it like this, “In this is love not that we loved God, but that He loved us and gave His Son to be the expiation for our sins (I John 4:10).”

Corrie Ten Boom put it like this: “In the forest fire, there is always one place where the fire cannot reach. It is the place where the fire has already burned itself out. Calvary is the place where the fire of God’s judgment against sin burned itself out completely. It is there that we are safe.”

Wayne E. Ward described it like this: “All heaven and earth converge upon that central cross. The drama of redemption reached its amazing climax when human sin rose up and divine love reached down to that cross on Calvary! No words could possibly catch the despair which overwhelmed the disciples as they took the body down from the cross and laid it in Joseph’s tomb. The drama was over. The king had come, but He was a king that nobody wanted. With wicked hands men had brutally tortured Him and His dead body was already in the grave, from which no traveler ever returned.”

“What wondrous love is this, O my soul,” writes the poet. “That caused the Lord of bliss to lay aside His crown for my soul, for my soul, to lay aside His crown for my soul.”

That is why it had to be. Jesus could not ask His disciples to make a sacrifice He was not willing to make Himself. There was no other way to reveal the awfulness of man’s sin, and the awesomeness of God’s love.

Of course, the challenge to each of us is to respond in faith to that love, to cast off the sin that so easily besets us, and to give our lives to Him as He gave His life for us. Amen.

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