

## **The Downward Trajectory**

Isaiah 50:5-9  
Philippians 2:5-11

Some years ago this congregation changed its Palm Sunday worship services. Instead of sixty minutes of celebratory praise for the Messiah who entered Jerusalem on this day, we decided to bend the trajectory downward as the hour passed. We start worship with praise. The children process in with their palm fronds waving. We sing a bright Palm Sunday hymn. But as we enter the Word of God section—the core of any proper Presbyterian worship—we dial the brightness down a bit. Today we read two passages that do not reference Jesus' triumphal Palm Sunday ride. Instead, we read of his self-emptying, his humiliation. As we progress into the response to the word, our organ offertory will be entitled *Via Dolorosa*, or *Way of Sorrows*. Our final hymn, *What Wondrous Love Is This*, is traditionally associated with Good Friday, the day we remember Christ's crucifixion.

This is no accident. This downward trajectory for Palm Sunday worship comes from the Liturgical Movement, a wave of study and planning for worship services that started late in the last century. The idea is to acquaint the congregation, many of whom do not attend Maundy Thursday or Good Friday services, with the full passion of Christ, with his suffering as well as his triumph. It became all the rage in our seminaries in the '90s and aughts, after I attended but during Lant Davis' studies. As I understand it, he brought the idea here with him. I confess I had never encountered it

before coming to Terre Haute. I would say I *like* it. But that is not strictly right. The passion is not likable. Jesus suffered in agony for us. He did not deserve it. We do not deserve his gracious gift. Nevertheless, the passion had to happen. We ought therefore remember it. We ought to worship the servant who suffered for our sake.

Isaiah 50 marks the opening of a third section in the book bearing the prophet's name. Third Isaiah is characterized by a back and forth swing between prophecies of the suffering servant and of his ultimate vindication before the eyes of the nations. Our five verses contain both. They open with the prophet speaking in the voice of the Suffering Servant who is to come. This Suffering Servant is the peculiar genius of Isaiah and his school of prophets. He is clearly the Messiah, but not a triumphal Messiah. He comes as God's emissary, as the promised deliverer of the Children of Israel. Yet he accomplishes his mission through suffering. Here he says, "I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I hid not my face from shame and spitting." After Good Friday Jesus' Jewish disciples would remember these words with wonder.

The roots of the concept of the Suffering Servant actually go deeper in time even than the 540 years before Christ when whoever wrote Third Isaiah lived. They go back to the Exodus, to the gift of God's law. That law requires very specific offerings for sin, many of which involve slaughtering a lamb. On one his first encounters with Jesus, John the Baptist would exclaim, "Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!" Some scholars contend that the imagery of the

Suffering Servant go all the way back to Genesis. Abraham is one of the earliest of the historical figures in the Bible. We can use biblical and extra-biblical sources to date, approximately, when he actually lived: around 1600 years before Christ. And in one of those years he nearly slaughtered Isaac, his own son, at the command of God. When the Lord saw Abraham's obedience even to such an extreme order, he sent a ram instead, a sheep to be slaughtered.

Isaiah 50 continues into a miniature courtroom drama. Because the Lord God helps him the Servant can “stand up together” with his adversaries, with those who smote his back and pulled his beard. The image refers to opposing attorneys standing in court. The prosecuting attorney, the Servant's opposition counsel, will charge him. But, “Behold, the Lord God helps me; who can declare me guilty? Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.” In those days before stainless steel, the Hebrews—like many Near-Eastern cultures—had a saying that true protection was to be found only where “moth and rust do not decay.” The image suggests corruption, a falling-apart caused by one's own sins. In their thinking, those eaten by moths **deserved** it. Thus, not only did Third Isaiah have confidence that the Suffering Servant would ultimately prevail over his enemies, they would then suffer in turn for their harassment of him.

The Russians have many pithy, dark sayings, many of them too pithy and dark to share in a sermon. One that we can say just now goes like this: “Tears should come as no surprise; joy should astonish us.” I am assured it sounds terribly romantic and

tragic in the Russian language. Their history has left the Russian people intimately acquainted with suffering. Perhaps their greatest writer, Leo Tolstoy, wrote of the lead character in The Death of Ivan Ilych, "(His) life had been the most simple and most ordinary and therefore the most terrible and most painful." A careerist, a bureaucratic climber, Ilych has never given his own mortality a thought. But one day death announces its nearness and he is shocked to his soul.

Tolstoy experienced a powerful conversion to Christianity just before writing The Death of Ivan Ilych. That is, he experienced a new and profound sense of truth in the religion that had always stayed in the background of his life. He began to believe in goodness, in hope, despite the tragedy that pervaded, and pervades, the Russian experience of life. He began to see the redemptive side of suffering, that it can often give us perspective and even gratitude for what we have instead of bitterness for what we do not. Third Isaiah would certainly have understood. So would the Apostle Paul, who wrote the letter to the Philippians from which we read this morning. Following four verses that urge his readers to imitate Christ in humility, exuding the same love, patience and unity, Paul opens our passage with, "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus." In other words, "drawing from Christ Jesus, develop his habit of thought and attitude."

What is Christ's habit? Paul tries next to describe the nature of Jesus Christ. Indeed, these next few verses have been called the greatest Christology in existence. Not bad for a mere four verses! Christology is the study of the nature and being of

Jesus Christ. Paul tells us he was “in the form of God”. That form has physical and spiritual implications. Jesus, Paul means, is truly God in being. He possesses all God's power, all God's omniscience, his full and complete knowledge.

Yet, “he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.” That verb “grasped” refers not to taking hold of something, but **keeping** one's hold on it. Having the being and nature of God, Jesus intentionally decided to let go of it. He, “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave (the better translation than 'servant')." The Greek word Paul chose for “emptied” yields some insight. In Greek it is “kenosis”; it literally means “to deprive of power, to lay aside all possessions, to experience a loss of meaning”. How very Tolstoyan! Jesus chose to divest himself of power, possessions, even after a sense, of meaning. His life was not about what so many thought. He had come as the Suffering Servant who would accomplish victory—legal victory, existential victory, spiritual victory—by losing himself.

We know the story does not end there. Easter comes after Good Friday. Jesus became a slave to our sin precisely in order to rise in triumph over death. But following his downward trajectory—if only for parts of three days—reminds us of the incredible love which empowered him to give up his power. We know that, as Paul puts it, “God has highly exalted him” and given him the name to which every knee shall bow and every tongue confess. But first he had to suffer.

Historians generally use the number 70 million as the estimated total deaths in

all nations during World War II. Of those 70 million, the Soviets lost about 27 million, nearly 39% of the aggregate total and over 40% of their population. By way of comparison, the USA suffered less than 420,000 deaths—still a horrible figure, but just over one percent of the Soviet deaths. There can be no excuse for the Russian's current barbaric aggression against Ukraine. There can, however, be at least partial explanations for it. Most of these explanations try to dig in between Vladimir Putin's ears. We will leave that for better informed, less squeamish observers. We can, however, try to understand that Russian culture has a living and terrible memory of national suffering. It makes its people both more legitimately afraid of foreign threats, and at the same time more vulnerable to cynical manipulation. It explains a lot.

In a world which seems to understand only force, Jesus offers weakness. In a world that seems mired in tragedy, Jesus offers humility. In a world seemingly incapable of saving itself from evil, Jesus offers rescue. He empties himself for sinners like us. It is enough. Paradoxically, it is enough. Our path to freedom and security leads not through aggression but through sacrifice. Our path to hope leads through Good Friday before it reaches Easter. Jesus came down, all the way down to us, before he rose. But then he rose all the way, too. We therefore can go through the darkness and sadness of his cross to the exaltation of his resurrection. The thoughtful author Tony Campolo popularized in the 1980's the saying, "It may be Friday, but Sunday's on its way!" Good Friday will come with the cross on the sidewalk. But that cross will wear a garland of flowers next Sunday morning. Follow Jesus down—and up! Give praise to the God who suffered, for us.