

Quest of Questioning

Isaiah 53: 1-9

John 20: 24-29

It's easy to misunderstand. I do it so regularly, it seems like a daily event in my life. The fact that my hearing isn't great, and I'm trying to hear what some soft spoken teenager is saying whenever I'm subbing, I'm almost sure to screw up several times a day. I literally have bend down, pointing my good ear at their mouth so that I can figure it out, and sometimes that doesn't work on the first try.

I know that I'm not the only one. There was the lawyer in a personal injury suit, for example, who asked the plaintiff, "And is it true that you were shot in the lumbar region?" The answer came back, "No sir, we weren't in the woods at all."

The follow-up question, "Well, sir, I understand you and the defendant were involved in an altercation". "Oh, no sir, he's not my tailor."

Let's try again, "But didn't he shoot you in the fracas?" "Well, I would say it was about midway between the fracas and the navel!"

You can talk to people who are so distracted, that they don't really understand what you're saying and get it all wrong. President Richard Nixon was shaking hands at an airport one day, and a little girl asked, "How is Smokey doing?" Nixon looked puzzled, and so an aide whispered in his ear, "Smokey the Bear, National Zoo". At that the president's face brightened, he stuck out his hand, and grinned, "How do you do, Miss Bear?"

Or when you see something, you can totally misunderstand what's really taking place. Eyewitness testimony has been the linchpin in trials since witnesses were invented. Yet it's been shown repeatedly that eyewitness testimony is amazingly unreliable. It's common for several witnesses to experience the same event and each one understands that something entirely different took place.

The passage from Isaiah 53 is another of the "suffering servant" passages. It interprets events contrasting what people perceived versus what it really meant.

It's no surprise that this passage of the suffering servant has been related by Christians to Jesus, and some of the peculiar details of the Jesus story find their source and importance in fulfilling the words of the prophet Isaiah. But Isaiah surely had other ideas, and that should always be our primary focus. Understanding our text in its context is the priority before other conjectural leaps.

Who or what is Isaiah talking about? The words are so enigmatic and ambiguous; a figure who is both despised and exalted, who is held in high regard by royalty, yet painfully humiliated, whose suffering is excruciating, yet his reward is great, whose righteousness is exceptional, yet is counted among the worst of sinners. What is Isaiah doing?

Scholars are quite divided. Some say Isaiah refers to an incomparable individual, real or imagined, but the other belief is that Isaiah is describing a whole people, the people of God themselves, in a metaphorical individual figure. That's fascinating. Has Isaiah created a way to show God's people to themselves, as if in a mirror? Is Isaiah teaching people to be bearers of hope and life amid their legacy of pain, humiliation and suffering? It fits with Isaiah's theme.

The role of this suffering servant is to be both unexceptional and quite exceptional in a variety of ways. The passage really begins at 52:13 as the servant is "raised and lifted up, and highly exalted." In the next verse, "many were appalled by him," his form and appearance disfigured and marred "beyond human likeness." This mysterious figure bears God's word – *For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand*. It doesn't get more enigmatic than that.

Our passage starts: *Who has believed **our** message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?* What message? Who is "our" in "our message"? We can figure out that "the arm of the Lord" is God's strength, God's reach, God's powerful presence striving against sinful powers in the world.

The "our" is likely those who believe in God, who would recognize the power of God working in the world, and working against its corrupt values, attitudes, and practices which strive against God's will. "Our" is the believers who understand that God's ways and the world's ways are often in conflict and struggle.

Now what is the **message** conveyed by the suffering servant? His pitiable and painful existence is the life lived in order that others may find healing and new life. *The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed ... the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all*. Isaiah is at pains to make it clear that the suffering servant gained nothing to his own direct benefit.

We do learn in verse 10 that the reward for the humiliations, pains, and sacrifices of the suffering servant will accrue to those who come after him, and that his life 'will prosper' the will of the Lord in the world. He may be exalted by God among the greatest servants, and that will be for his unselfish, sacrificial commitment to see the will of God advanced, and for God's people to be richly blessed. The servant stood his ground faithfully against the powers of the world, and they have done their best to inflict their worst upon him, and make a mockery of his life. God will see the servant's faithfulness over everything and celebrate his outstanding commitment.

Is this a model for God's people coming fresh out of Babylon and returning to the Promised Land? Is this a role for faithful servants of God to play, something that stands outside the usual norms of religious observance?

In this mission, can they see the transforming power of God's Spirit breaking out by their witness? Can they reflect of the light of life, the hope and promise for many,

pouring out their lives as an offering of thanksgiving? That's what Isaiah may be describing to battered, beaten Israel on its return to the Promised Land.

It's the challenge to people of faith in that era and this one, to make our witness in faithful action, working for the blessing of all by ministering for the Kingdom. But we do need to understand what's going on, what God wants from his faithful people.

In John's gospel, the fearful disciples are gathered together. Hiding anxiously behind locked doors, Jesus suddenly appears, calming them and focusing them by repeating: *Peace be with you*. Shock and awe may have its place, but in this case, he wants them to understand what's going, and what he expects of them.

Then Jesus commissions them: *As the Father has sent me, I am sending you*. Not waiting for Pentecost, John's gospel has Jesus breathe on them saying, *Receive the Holy Spirit*. (Remember the multiple meanings of *ruach* – breath, wind, and spirit, right?) They are then instructed: *If you forgive anyone who has sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven*.

Our NIV translation has smoothed over a significant problem in the text about **not** forgiving. The text literally says: *If you **retain** the sins of any, they are **retained***. What does “retained” mean? And who is doing the retaining? Is it the one who sinned who retains the sin, or the one who could have forgiven but decided to “retain” the sin? There is no easy answer, but at least one very respected scholar (RE Brown, *John, Vol. II* [Anchor]) takes the view that seems best to me, the more difficult reading. If the reading was as simple as our Bible translation, it would make a very balanced couplet which John can turn in every other sentence. But he avoids the easy couplet here and gives us something different – he did that for a reason, to wake us up.

The alternative reading – that the one who ***could have forgiven, should have forgiven, but did not*** – that one retains the sin. The failure to forgive becomes the sin retained by the one who refused to forgive.

The point is that forgiveness is now the norm, the model to be followed by disciples. This is the good news of Jesus which the disciples now bear – God's gracious love forgives, and the disciples are to reflect that kind of forgiveness. It is not a case where the disciples are given the powers of God to not forgive and then punish – heaven help us! It is a short but compelling commissioning that makes sharing and witnessing to the gracious love of a forgiving God the singular priority of the disciples.

Well, when Jesus appeared to the disciples, Thomas was out doing whatever. A week later, Jesus particularly comes to be seen by Thomas who has famously doubted the other disciples' reports of having seen Jesus. Thomas had declared, *Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it*. Frankly, I think Thomas was justified and, be honest, you'd have said the same thing. It's true: seeing is believing.

A week had passed since Thomas made his demand, probably not expecting to be taken literally. When the disciples were together again in the locked room, Jesus appeared again, singling out Thomas for treatment. *Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Stop doubting and believe.*

Thomas stopped doubting, but Jesus made him into an object lesson about faith for the ages. Thomas stopped doubting because seeing is believing. Seeing brings understanding. It's pretty hard to believe something without seeing it, without having a clear understanding of what's going on.

We're called to question what is before us, to seek better, higher understanding in the light of the resurrection. As we consider our effective witness, we should realize that seeing faith practiced is a whole lot different from simply hearing about it.

This is critical because in the gospel of John, the latest gospel writing in the Bible, the possibility of eyewitnesses, even descendent relatives of eyewitnesses, are nonexistent. Communicating an understanding of the faith can no longer occur through any direct contacts with the past. Communicating an understanding of the faith will require faith in action, a practice of what living a resurrection faith is all about.

No, they can't inspect the physical form of the resurrected Jesus. People need to discover Jesus in another way. They need to be able to see it to understand it.

I like to get resources for men in my prison class. Occasionally one of them will ask if I can get them a book on something like video editing software or music editing software. I can get them a book easy enough, but the book is useless if you can't have the hands-on experience of actually using the software. It's like having a book on carpentry, but never being allowed to work with wood or tools. It's nearly impossible to understand the experience.

In the same way, it's nearly impossible to understand Kingdom faith if you simply read scripture and never put any of it to use. What we end up with are corruptions of the kind of faith that Jesus taught and practiced. We have people of faith disconnected from the work of the Kingdom. The worst part is that they think the corruption is exactly what Jesus wanted. Generally that means cheap grace, ridiculous biblical literalism, backward social values, law and order, and flag-waving nationalism. None of that actually relates to the Kingdom of God as Jesus gave witness to it.

Resurrection means asking questions to seek better understanding, to root out misunderstanding and corruptions. It means living and practicing a faith that matters. It means realizing that there are many doubting Thomases in our society, and their doubts are with good reason. When we understand and practice a living witness to Jesus, then they will see and believe. They will know the resurrection that means salvation and new life for all.