

This morning is our final Sunday in the sermon series “The meaning of Christmas.” My goal in this series has been to answer the question “Who is this Jesus whose birth we celebrate on Christmas?” To answer this question, I have been looking through the prophecies found in the book of Isaiah about the coming Messiah. The context of Isaiah is this: the kingdom of Israel has split into two: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Judah was facing pressure from Aram & Ephraim, two tribes in the northern kingdom. King Ahaz, the king of Judah, is afraid. Isaiah tells him to trust in God for deliverance and God will protect them. Ahaz instead reaches out to a foreign nation, Assyria, for help. Assyria helps defend Judah, but then turns and defeats Judah and takes them off into captivity. In Isaiah 9, Isaiah prophesies that despite their rebellion, ultimately a child will be born who will be the ideal king, and will be God himself, and he will be the eternal king, bringing wisdom and peace once and for all to Israel.

*<sup>6</sup> For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. <sup>7</sup> Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.*

Israel is taken into captivity, and eventually Assyria is conquered by Babylon. Chapters 40-66 of Isaiah are directed to Israel in exile, encouraging them that after this time of discipline, God will restore them. **More than that, as we read we see that Israel's physical exile points to a larger exile, the separation from God due to their sin.** And throughout this section come prophecies about a figure called the Servant of the Lord who God would raise up to do what Israel had failed to do; he would come and bring salvation and justice and an eternal kingdom of peace not only to Israel but to the world. In chapter 53, which we will be in this morning, comes the most shocking passage in all of Isaiah, a prophecy about the manner in which this servant would bring about salvation to Israel and the world. Imagine being an Israelite and hearing this passage: how would you make sense of it?

**Isaiah 52:13-15** - *See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. <sup>14</sup> 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-- <sup>15</sup> 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.*

**Isaiah 53:1 – 12** - *Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> 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.

Think about the people of Israel hearing the prophecies of Isaiah. They are in exile, but God has promised a deliverer, someone who will restore Israel to glory and usher in an everlasting kingdom of peace and justice. Surely this deliverer will be a conquering hero, a mighty man of strength and valor, vanquishing the enemy by his power and leadership. So what is all this talk about the servant being disfigured, appalling, and killed? Think of how troubling this passage would have been, for three reasons in particular:

- 1) **The servant will die a violent death** – Look at verse 5: *But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities.* Verse 5 says he was pierced - run through in the Hebrew, a very violent death. How does that fit with being a conquering hero who will free God's people from oppression? How could this servant bring an end to violence by undergoing such extreme violence?
- 2) **The servant will die FOR the nation** – Again, v. 5 says that he is pierced **for our** transgressions. And v. 10 says *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*. Somehow this servant is going to die FOR the transgressions of Israel, and he will be a sacrifice for them. Now, certainly the Israelites were familiar with the concept of the animal sacrifice, where an animal died in place of the person who deserved to die. But a human sacrifice? The Bible is clear that human sacrifice is wrong, so how can a human pay for the sins of the nation? So not only will the servant die a violent death in order to free his people from violence and oppression, but he will die FOR the nation's sins, a perfect human sacrifice. How would an Israelite make sense of this?

- 3) **The servant will die voluntarily** – <sup>4</sup> *Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows*. Isaiah writes in v. 4 that the servant will take up our infirmities, which means he will pick them up and put them on his back in Hebrew. And look at v. <sup>7</sup> *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*. How can God endorse what seems like suicide, someone who voluntarily chooses to die?

How do you make sense of this? This servant doesn't fit the profile of a conquering hero who will redeem the people of God from oppression. How do you explain this servant, who will voluntarily choose to die a violent death, and that somehow this death will pay for the sins of the nation? Who could this servant be?

We find the answer in Acts 8:26-39, the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch:

*Acts 8:26-39 - Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road-- the desert road-- that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." <sup>27</sup> So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, <sup>28</sup> and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. <sup>29</sup> The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." <sup>30</sup> Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. <sup>31</sup> "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. <sup>32</sup> The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. <sup>33</sup> In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth." <sup>34</sup> The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" <sup>35</sup> Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. <sup>36</sup> As they traveled along the road, they came to some*

*water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?"* <sup>37</sup>  
<sup>38</sup> *And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.* <sup>39</sup> *When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.*

In Acts 8, we find an Ethiopian eunuch who has gone all the way to Jerusalem to worship God, and he's coming back reading the scroll of Isaiah. Philip finds him reading from Isaiah 53, and the eunuch asks him who the passage is about. And Philip tells him the good news about Jesus. **That's the answer – this is not just an ordinary man, but the very Son of God.** His voluntary death is not suicide, because it is His own life to lay down. And He can die for the nations because He lives a perfect life. And it explains the violence of the death, since the law of God says that is only by the blood sacrifice that sins are atoned for:

*Leviticus 17:11 - For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life.*

*Hebrews 9:22 - In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.*

Isaiah 53 prophecies that this servant is Jesus, the eternal Son of God, who will come into our world not just to live the life we could not live, but to die the death we should have died, a sacrificial death for our sins. And not only that, Isaiah 53 prophecies that his death will not be the end:

<sup>11</sup> *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*

The Messiah will die for the sins of the people, but will rise again, showing that He has the power to conquer sin and death.

This is hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, and yet it spells out clear as day who Jesus is and why He was born into our world.

Two implications of this passage for us today:

- 1) **Do not judge things as the world judges**

There are many contrasts in Isaiah 53 between what people thought about the servant and what was the reality.

<sup>2</sup> *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.* <sup>3</sup> *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*

They were appalled by him, they dismissed him, they considered him cursed by God. Jesus was ordinary, despised, rejected, a man of sorrows. Contrary to the Jesus found in the Bible miniseries on TV, Jesus was not some Greek God walking through Israel drawing people by his magnetic smile. Instead, he was ordinary, and was despised and rejected, a man of sorrows. He was overlooked. How wonderful is that. Whatever we have gone through, He has been there. He suffered.

**Hebrews 4:14-16** - *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.* <sup>15</sup> *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin.* <sup>16</sup> *Let us then **approach the throne of grace** with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find **grace** to help us in our time **of need.***

We assume it's the tall, dark, and handsome, the rich and powerful, the beautiful people who will be the world-changers. But God did not use the oak tree, but the tender shoot. He did not use the beautiful, but the plain, the rejected. He came not as a powerful warrior but as a baby in a manger, born to a mother who was a pregnant, unwed teen before Joseph married her. He was welcomed to this world not by kings but by shepherds and astrologers. Be encouraged. This is our God.

**1 Samuel 16:7** - *But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD **looks at the heart.**"*

2) **He died for our sins, to make us right with God**

<sup>4</sup> *Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.* <sup>5</sup> *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.* <sup>6</sup> *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.*

The servant not only lived the life we could not live, but then died the death we deserved to die, taking the penalty we deserved for our sins, taking the punishment Israel deserved for breaking the covenant it had with God.

He gets pierced, crushed, punishment, and wounds; we get forgiveness, peace, and healing.

Isaiah compares us to sheep, eating grass and going astray, not aware of the consequences of our choices until we are lost. But the Lord laid our sins on Him.

That phrase “laid on him our iniquity” would call to mind the scapegoat in the sacrificial system. In Leviticus 16, the high priest would choose two goats – one would be sacrificed as a sin offering, and the other would make atonement by being sent out into the desert. Sacrificial system, scapegoat

**Leviticus 16:20-22** - *"When Aaron has finished making atonement for the Most Holy Place, the Tent of Meeting and the altar, he shall bring forward the live goat.<sup>21</sup> He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites-- all their sins-- and put them on the goat's head. He shall send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task.<sup>22</sup> The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert.*

That sacrificial system was of course pointing to the once for all sacrifice of the Servant, Jesus, who took up our sins upon himself and paid the penalty once for all.

**Hebrews 10:1-4,10-14** - *The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming-- not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship.<sup>2</sup> If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins.<sup>3</sup> But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins,<sup>4</sup> because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins...<sup>10</sup> And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.<sup>11</sup> Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.<sup>12</sup> But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat*

down at the right hand of God. <sup>13</sup> Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, <sup>14</sup> because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

He takes the punishment, we get the peace.

**2 Corinthians 5:17-21** - Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! <sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: <sup>19</sup> that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. <sup>20</sup> We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup> **God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**

He was innocent, we were guilty, but he takes our penalty.

What is the meaning of Christmas? Christmas is a story about a God who saw his people rebelling against God, hurting themselves and each other, caught in their sins and struggles and unable to save themselves from the oppression they were under. It's about a God who could have punished his people as a result, but instead chose to come into our story, to be born into our world, to live the perfect life they could not live, to die the death they deserved to die, to willingly take the curse upon himself so that his people might be forgiven and experience the eternal life they were meant to live.

I wanted to share one of my favorite quotes, from Brennan Manning's book *The Signature of Jesus*:

*"On the night of December 13, during what began as a long and lonely hour of prayer, I heard in faith Jesus Christ say, 'For love of you I left my Father's side. I came to you who ran from me, fled me, who did not want to hear my name. For love of you I was covered with spit, punched, beaten, and affixed to the wood of the cross.'*

*These words are burned on my life. Whether I am in a state of grace or disgrace, elation or depression, that night of fire quietly burns on. I looked at the crucifix for a long time, figuratively saw the blood streaming from every pore of his body, and heard the cry of his wounds: 'This isn't a joke. It is not a laughing matter to me that I have loved you.'* The longer I looked, the more I realized that no man

*has ever loved me and no one ever could love me as he did. I went out of the cave, stood on the precipice, and shouted into the darkness, 'Jesus, are you crazy? Are you out of your mind to have loved me so much?' I learned that night what a wise old man had told me years earlier: 'Only the one who has experienced it can know what the love of Jesus Christ is. Once you have experienced it, nothing else in the world will seem more beautiful or desirable.'"*

Do you know the love of Jesus? Christmas is about the rescue mission of God, a God who loves you so much that He sent His Son to live and die for you. Turn in faith to trust in Him today.