

Christ Presbyterian Church
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When Heaven Came Down: Messiah Who Suffers
Isaiah 52-53, Philippians 2:6-10

Ever notice how things look so different when you're coming up on them than they do in the rearview mirror after they've already happened? You're not sure what's going to happen beforehand and so you think about it and you wonder, but you don't really know. And then afterward, you can't help but think how different the real thing was from what you'd thought about. And so, it's August and you're sure this is Notre Dame's year. The forces of righteousness will finally prevail and you go into the season with high hope. Afterward all you can talk about is those protestant refs and how they stole it again. It looks different, but it happens. That's the way Christmas is.

Literally for hundreds of years, before the coming of Jesus, there had been rumors and mutterings about how something was going to change. Somebody was going to come and change everything. And the prophets started to call that person who would come the Messiah. The one who would turn the world upside down and right all the wrongs and bring Israel to the center of God's plan. And of all the prophets, Isaiah may have seen it the clearest.

We're going to look through the eyes of the prophets as we go toward Christmas this year and try to see what they hoped for. Why does it look so different when we're around a Christmas tree than it did when they talked about a Messiah?

So, last week Carrie started, and she was terrific. She said one of the things that Isaiah said was that the Messiah would be known by his passion for justice. That people who lived as slaves under the oppression of the Assyrian Empire would not only be free, but would have justice—that the Messiah would bring justice. Today, a different promise comes, sort of a surprising promise. It's also in Isaiah 52. Nearly 600 years before Christmas, Isaiah sees Christmas coming. And he says,

Isaiah 52 "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who declare salvation, who say to God's people, "God reigns! God Won!" The watchman shout together for joy . . . all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God."

That's Christmas celebrated. But then, the very next chapter says it's not going to be what you think. It's not going to be the emperor at the head of the parade. Isaiah 53 says:

Isaiah 53 “But who believed how the Power of God was revealed? He grew up like a tender shoot, like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by humanity, a man of suffering, (sometimes saying, ‘He was a man of sorrows’) familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces . . . we did not honor this Messiah. He took up our pain and bore our suffering, but we considered Him punished by God, and afflicted . . . Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush Him and cause Him to suffer . . . And after He was suffered, He will see the light of life and be satisfied . . . For He bore the sin of many, and interceded for transgressors.”

That’s the surprise of Christmas, that the Messiah comes not as the crowning king with lightning bolts, but as a blue collar baby out in the boondocks. Central to Christmas is the idea that the God of the universe becomes human. And central to being human is the experience of suffering. We don’t talk about that a lot. We talk about the joy and bubbly, the gift giving and all that kind of stuff, but central to the human experience is that all human beings will suffer.

Just so that they wouldn’t miss it, the very first followers of Jesus put it into a song. We just heard a great new, contemporary song at the offering, but for thousands of years people have been singing about what their faith was so that they would remember the very first song. Maybe one of the very first hymns ever written by followers of Jesus is in Paul’s letter to the Philippians. And it says this about the Messiah:

Philippians 2:5-8 “In your relationships, have the same attitude as Christ Jesus: Who being in very nature God,” (in other words was God) “did not consider equality with God something to cling to; rather, He made Himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made human. And becoming a man, He humbled Himself by being obedient to death—even death on a cross.”

Without acknowledging the idea that God comes to earth in order to suffer because people suffer, we miss Christmas. Without acknowledging that there is suffering and brokenness inside each one of us, we offer what a German theologian once called cheap grace. He says that a lot of you Americans like to buy grace. You can buy it at the store, you can buy it at church. That’s cheap grace. His name was Dietrich Bonhoeffer and he said, “Cheap grace is forgiveness without repentance, baptism without relationship, communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without obedience, grace without the cross.” He said you talk so much about the cradle, but not about the cross; grace without a need to be saved by Jesus Christ.

So, this week the path of the Messiah is what is called the Suffering Servant. The one who comes, not as the king, but the Suffering One, and that was Jesus. When Jesus comes, He spends more time with people who are suffering than with the powerful, with the outcasts more than the religious. He made friends with criminals and tax collectors. He reached out to the sick and He healed them. His closest followers were not CEOs, they were blue collar outcasts, and he spent so much time with prostitutes that the

priests kept saying, “For God’s sake, what are you doing? Don’t you know what this will do to your reputation?” And He said, “For God’s sake, I know exactly what I’m doing. I’m coming to suffer with the suffering.”

Without a Suffering Savior we have a plastic Christmas. There’s a lot of plastic Christmas and it’s got very little to do with the culture wars, whether there are stars on Starbucks cups or public manger scenes, whether we say Merry Christmas or Happy Holidays. I think the plastic Christmas comes when you get the gift wrapped Jesus, the one that’s there to make you feel nice. The reason that I think the Suffering Jesus is so important is because when you come up against suffering, you need help. I need help. I don’t know if you’ve had this experience, but somebody comes up to you and you ask, “Hey, how are you doing?” And they say, “Well, mom died over the weekend. Just totally out of the blue. I don’t know which end is up.” What do you say? My temptation is to say, “Oh. I’m sorry.” And then put my arm around them because I’m a priest and that’s what priests do. I put my arm around them and say something like, “Well, you know, it will be okay.” That’s what well-meaning people say when they don’t know what to say. It may not be okay. Or, maybe some of you have heard it said, “I know how you feel” when the person doesn’t know how you feel. That’s hard. “I know how you feel.” No you don’t! And I don’t mean that—we’re trying our best.

We had a service here on Tuesday night, December 1, where there were about 300 people and they were here because they had lost somebody this year and the holidays are hard for people who are grieving. They filled this room with candlelight and they took little crosses to remind themselves of the people who had died, and they put them on the tree. We sort of huddled together and sang and remembered the people that we loved and who had died. And those people could look at each other and say “I know how you feel.” Can I just suggest to you that’s what Christmas is about? Christmas power comes because God is able to say, “I know how you feel.” And not say, “Take two of these and it will be better in the morning. I’ll waive my wand, I’ll do a miracle, it will be fine. If you do the right thing, I’ll do the right thing.” But instead, God comes and says, “I know how you feel.”

That’s why we have support groups in this community. We have people who are recovering from loss who reach out to other people recovering from loss. We have people who have the pain of infertility, when everybody on the planet is pregnant, reaching out to other people who can’t have children either. People who have experienced divorce or who feel alone, people addicted to things they can’t beat, meeting with others who feel the same way. Experiencing that suffering together allows us to admit the truth; that I’m not in control. Can I just tell you that is one of the great phrases in human language—I am not in control? Only then can somebody else move into control.

The Suffering Servant at Christmas is God coming and saying, I think I will not split the Red Sea again, I think I won’t make the mountains shatter, I won’t do lightning; this time I’ll come and show you how close I can get to your fears, and your dreams, and your hopes, and your suffering. And that will change the way you look at God forever.

One of the books I read this autumn was called *Clouds of Glory*. It was the latest biography of Robert E. Lee, a civil war general on the Southern side. And the generals loved Lee, but he drove them crazy. The reason he drove them crazy is because every day of the civil war he refused to sleep in a bed in the house. He refused to go and visit his family, even though his family was in the next town over, because his troops could not. He refused to eat good, healthy food when his troops were miserable. He had a tent set up in the middle of the camp and he would be at the back of the line, and the other generals hated this. They thought when you were a general you deserved good food and comfort. Lee would have none of that. Generals around Lee would see the way the troops looked at General Lee, like he was somebody who was one of them. His men followed him through rain, and fire, and misery, gaining surprise victories one after another, because this man looked like an Olympic god and lived just like them.

What a great story about leadership. I'm doing a leadership lesson, I'm going to use that one, but I have to tell you, that's about heroes. That's not about you and me, that's about somebody that's up on the mountain top. Let me give you a better one that's closer to home. Maybe the most beautiful place on earth is the Hawaiian Islands, just gorgeous. And maybe the prettiest of the Hawaiian Islands is a tiny hidden one called Molokai. Molokai sits off by itself and it was known early on as an isolated place where one of the first leprosariums in the United States was located. A leprosarium is not where you treat leprosy, but where you quarantine it. We call it Hansen's Disease now, but all they knew years ago was that the disease was very contagious and disfiguring and led to an ugly, ugly, ugly death. In this beautiful place, they had a leprosarium that was run by Catholic nuns and priests and didn't really start to change from its despairing atmosphere until a new priest came. His name was Damien, Father Damien. And he noticed that attendance at the mass was very low and the reason that attendance was low was because mass was held, like it should be, at 11:00AM. But these disfigured, smelly human beings hated coming out in the sunlight because other people would see them. So, Father Damien started to have mass at 4:00AM in the middle of the night with only a candle on the altar, and they would shuffle in and he would welcome them by saying, "My brothers and sisters in Christ, beloved by God, welcome." And, after a time, they started to feel welcomed. They didn't feel embarrassed because they were in the dark with him calling out words of comfort, and this went on year after year after year, "My brothers and sisters in Christ." And one day he didn't say it, and at the beginning of the homily he didn't say "My brothers and sisters in Christ." Instead he says, "My fellow lepers," because Father Damien had been infected. He lived with, suffered from, and died with leprosy. And the community went like this (folds his hands together) because their leader knew how they felt.

That's the Suffering Servant at Christmas. It has actually become quite real for me this advent. A small group of us have been trying to figure out what we can do to help on the North side. What can we, primarily white suburban folk, do to help in this embattled place? Black studies minor in college, been involved in the African-American experience for forty years, and still going like this, banging my head against the wall. How do you

help in ways that will really help, because I can't say, "It will be okay." I can't say, "I know how you feel."

One of our elders gave me a book this week that I loved. It's called *Under Our Skin* by Ben Watson. He's an NFL player who tweeted something out after Ferguson and it's turned into a book. He said something that just rang true to me. He says, "In one paragraph you want to know the difference between your experience and my experience?" He said, "When you are driving and you see the police flashers behind you, you go 'Oh crap, how fast was I going?' And then you're fine and it's an annoyance, but you look to the police as being on your side. When I see the flashers behind me, I put my hands on the wheel and I pray that it will end okay and I'm scared. You don't know how I feel." I want to. I don't think it's about right and wrong. I don't think it's about winning an argument or changing public policy. There is some sense in which, until the suffering servants come and sit with people who suffer, this will go on.

Jesus Christ comes as one of us because common suffering leads to trust, and trust leads to vulnerability. If I don't trust you, I'm going to pretend like things are going okay. If I don't trust you, I'm not going to tell you what's really going on. If I trust you, I might lower the mask just a little. And only when we lower the masks is there a sense of hope and even joy. Even if nothing changes, there is joy in sitting together when we suffer commonly.

I love the old show *The West Wing*, the story of the White House. And it's about the leaders in the White House—the President, the Chief of Staff—and one of the big characters is the Deputy Chief of Staff. He's a young man, bright, passionate, loves to do the powerful thing, you know? He has an incident where he blows up and yells at the President because of trauma in his life, and you can't do that, so he has to go to counseling. The counseling looks like it will be very serious and he may lose his job and it's Christmas time. He comes out of the counseling and has an encounter with his boss that changes things. Let me show it to you.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQJ6yqQRAQs>

I love that. The Chief of Staff and the President of the United States, who's an alcoholic in recovery, knows that it is not through having the right answer or through power that you solve things, it's through sitting and suffering with someone and offering hope. I love that, but I live in a world that is so broken that my best friend can't get me out of the hole. We can sit down there and feel a little better, but I think it takes God himself to get us out of the hole. Christmas shows that God jumps down in the hole and says, "I know how you feel and I will suffer with you. Trust Me. Follow Me to get out." When we come to this table, we come to a place where we don't have to pretend that we've got it together. We don't have to fake it for God. We don't have to try harder to be a good Christian. We come here and say, God, I messed up again. Help me. God, I'm suffering. God, I don't have faith. God, God, help me. And you know what? The Messiah comes into the hole, and takes our hand, and says, "Let's eat together."

Pray with me, would you?

Lord Jesus, I'm glad you didn't stay on top of the mountain, blast guys with lightning, and put cosmic band aids on the good guys. I thank You that You know how it feels not to grow up as a king, but as a blue collar baby. You sit with people in their pain and instead of looking down at them, You embrace us. Lord Jesus, I ask You to give us the truth, the courage to tell the truth about the places that we are broken. I ask You, the Suffering Servant, to come and walk with us and teach us to see the folks who are broken, so that we may extend to them the invitation You make to us. I thank You that You didn't stay in heaven, but when You grew up to be a carpenter, You ate dinner with your friends and You broke the bread and You said, "I'm like you. This is My body, broken for You. I bleed, too." You poured out the wine and said, "This is the blood. My blood of a new covenant with God." When you eat this bread and you drink this cup you proclaim your trust in the One that comes for you and will come again. This Christmas and all the days of your life. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.