

Palm Sunday A Sermon 031608  
Isaiah 50:4-9a ; Psalm 31:9-16  
Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew Passion

In the name of one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

“The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.” Those are the opening lines to the Third Servant Song of Isaiah, which we just heard Betty read. May the God who spoke those words through the prophet Isaiah be gracious enough to make them come true here this morning. Lent can be a long six weeks – especially for those who have given up something important to them as a discipline; and for clergy, who find increasing demands on time and energy as the season progresses. Perhaps we can all find sustenance in God’s Word.

There are certain times every lectionary cycle when Isaiah is paired with the Gospel lessons. The reason can easily be seen this morning. On Palm Sunday we have that remarkable contrast of Jesus’ story – when He rides into Jerusalem on Sunday to shouts of “Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord,” and then barely five days later hears the same crowd, lustily yelling, “Crucify him!” And during this horrifying turn of events, when Jesus is beaten, spat upon and derided for being who He is, not once does He respond in kind. Never does He lash out. Never does He try to retaliate for the treatment He receives. Never do we hear Him call those who so badly mistreat Him, the names they so richly deserve.

The Third Servant Song of Isaiah was written almost six hundred years before the events of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the Passion that followed. But it is almost as if Isaiah – one of Israel's greatest *prophets* was standing in Jerusalem, witnessing what happened to Jesus and describing it in his wonderfully poetic language. "The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting." That matches up so well with the story of Jesus' Passion that it has been said by Christian scholars to have been written as a prophecy about Christ. I don't buy that argument, though. I think there's something much deeper here than simply a messianic prophecy that fits the Messiah.

Isaiah wrote about the time of the Babylonian exile. A time when Israel had been conquered, the Temple destroyed and its people sent out to live in faraway lands. The people were suffering mightily under this oppression and were waiting for a savior to come and rescue them. The same situation was at work in Jesus' time. The people might not have been living in exile, but they were definitely living under the oppression of Roman rule – and they were waiting for a savior to set them free. And then as a microcosm story within the larger narrative, we have Jesus as the example of someone suffering under the savagery of those who thought to dominate Him. And finally, there are the stories of the suffering of those in our own community; those who have recently lost a loved one, or have medical, emotional, marital, financial or end-of-life issues that

weigh heavily on them – those who may believe they are the only ones in the world who are suffering the way they are today. We are not alone. We never have been.

Here is what Isaiah had to say to the exiled Israelites, to the people living under Roman domination, to the suffering Jesus and to those who suffer today.

The Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced;  
therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall  
not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near.  
Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together.  
Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me.  
It is the Lord GOD who helps me; who will declare me guilty?

As Holy Week unfolds before us, we are called by God to remember – to re-live in the best way we can – the story of Jesus’ Passion, crucifixion and death. We are invited to get into the depths of it all with Jesus; to feel how deep is His emotional pain, even if we can only imagine the breadth of His physical pain. Because we cannot know the power of His sacrifice unless we really know the suffering cost of it.

But underneath every bit of the suffering that is coming Jesus’ way – and the suffering that is coming our way as well (if we allow it to); and underneath the suffering of our own day, the suffering we do, here and now – are God’s words through the Prophet. “The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; ... Let us stand up together. ... It is the Lord God who helps me; ....”

Amen.