

Why Me?

Isaiah 53: 4-12

Psalm 91

Hebrews 4:12-16

Mark 10: 35-45

St. Hilary's Episcopal Church, Prospect Heights IL

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Why me? Why . . . *me*? We all know that feeling. When something bad happens, we can feel singled out and beat up. Beat up *on purpose*, beat up *for a reason*, although we don't understand why. Why . . . *ME!*

Maybe that's not a rational reaction, but our gut-level responses don't answer to logic. I lost a good job in the recession of the early 80's, and all the rationality I could bring to bear didn't stop me from feeling singled out and beat up. And furthermore I found myself feeling vaguely guilty, which was even more irrational. I knew that! But knowing it was irrational didn't help at all. The heart has its reasons, which the reason does not know. So then, of course, I could feel guilty about feeling guilty, and even angrier than I already was about the whole situation. What a toxic mix!! But sooner or later we all find ourselves in that swamp, waist deep in the muck, angrily wondering *why me?*

It's a universal human reaction. And in the ancient human religions, there's an explanation for it. *Why me? Why you?* We are being punished. We have angered the gods. Or we have accumulated too much bad karma in an earlier lifetime, so in this lifetime we get breast cancer, or a child with leukemia, or we get laid off and have to sell the house because we can't pay the mortgage. "Who sinned," the people ask Jesus, "this man or his father, that he was born blind?" Somebody sinned, obviously. That's the inescapable emotional logic of *why me?*

But the crucifixion argues in the strongest possible way that God knows just how awful life can be. God knows what it feels like when your friends betray you, when your enemies get the upper hand, when you suffer terribly for no good reason at all. *For no good reason at all.* God has been through it all, and God is with us most passionately when we too are trapped in tragedy.

Christians keep crucifixes at hand because we are apt to need daily reminders that suffering is not punishment, no matter how often it feels that way. We also need reminders that our suffering will not destroy us. No matter what we lose, no matter what goes wrong, nothing can separate us from the love of God. Nothing can extinguish the fiery spark of the Holy One deep in our hearts. We are the beloved of God, who assures our survival even beyond the doorway of death. When we say that our religion is revealed, when we say that faith and grace are given us, that they are not something we have earned or figured out on our own, part of what we mean is that left to our own devices, humanity will always answer the question "why me?" with the answer "we deserve it." Somehow or other, we had it coming. Only God himself could demonstrate otherwise, and so God did.

Which is why today's readings are so astoundingly dangerous. "He was wounded for our transgressions," Isaiah says. "Upon him was the punishment that made us whole It was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain." It's a very famous passage, and it has often been taken as a prophecy fulfilled by Jesus. Someday, Isaiah says, someday some entirely innocent person will suffer terribly, and that will change everything for everybody. The life and death of Jesus did change everything for everybody, but nonetheless we have to be very careful with this passage from Isaiah.

The danger here is reading Isaiah in such a way that we in effect portray God as a violent father taking out his anger and his frustration by beating someone up. By this reading, Jesus steps in and takes the hit for us, and because God has had the bloody satisfaction of watching Jesus tortured and killed, God finally calms down again. God gets over his long-brooding anger at Adam and Eve, and so God decides to restore humanity to eternal life.

But the crucifixion was not God's idea. God didn't choose to "crush Jesus with pain." That was the Roman Empire, not God. The God we worship does not want human sacrifice. Brutal torture and murder are never the will of God, nor was that brutality necessary for our redemption. It *was* necessary for the Roman Empire, of course, because Jesus threatened them. Then and now, people who challenge the politically powerful often get themselves killed. No doubt it *was* the will of God to challenge

empire, to challenge the greatest empire the West has ever known. Nonetheless, the will of God is always love, and grace, and resurrection, not unspeakably brutal human sacrifice.

So what are we supposed to do with this passage in Isaiah? I think if we are honest about what's dangerous here, we free ourselves to look a little more closely and find a genuine bit of "good news." It's there, if you can get around the emotional trap of the violent father.

For instance: "by his bruises we are healed," Isaiah promises. How can that be? *Healed??* Healed of what?? Healing doesn't seem to have anything to do with appeasing the angry gods. But I think it has everything to do with Jesus. The life and death of Jesus can heal us of this dangerous tendency to respond to our own pain by feeling somehow guilty. The suffering of the innocent Jesus has, by the strange logic of resurrection, demonstrated to all of us that violence and suffering are never the will of God. We can be healed of the question, "why me?" and we can be healed of the temptation to think that those who suffer had it coming. Most importantly, perhaps, we can be healed of the temptation to model ourselves upon a violent God by becoming violent ourselves whenever we are frustrated and angry.

Furthermore, look at what Jesus tells James and John: they will drink from the same cup he drinks from, they will be baptized as he was baptized. So okay, what happened at Jesus' baptism?? Do you remember? God says, "this is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased." When life gets really hard, that's a good line to remember! We are the beloved children of God, who is pleased with us.

And what about sharing Jesus' cup? In the ancient world, to share a meal with someone was to claim social equality with them in the most extraordinary way. So to share Jesus' cup--as we do in the Eucharist--reasserts what God declares at Jesus' baptism: we are the children of God, and we are beloved. We are cherished just as deeply as any of us cherish our own children--and more so! Infinitely more so!

When James and John finally go through this baptism and drink from this cup, they will get over worrying about status and power. They will realize that leadership in God's kingdom is built upon love, not power. They will stop trying to prove themselves. What a

great idea--for any of us! Stop trying to prove yourself. If you have nothing to prove to God, you have nothing to prove to anyone.

Let me leave you with this little exercise. Think of the nicest person you know. Think of the kindest, most decent, most generous, most reliable person you have ever known. God can't be less kind or less generous or less reliable than this person. In fact, by any measure God is said to be exponentially more loving, infinitely more loving. Mother Teresa is nothing much in comparison with God. Neither is your Aunt Hilda, or Mrs. Halloran over on Elmhurst Road, or your neighbor Ed who will always lend anyone a hand with anything. Collect all the saints you have ever known first hand, or all the people who died trying to help others on 9/11, and even together they are less loving and kind and decent than God is.

"This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased." "This is my beloved daughter, in whom I am well pleased." Pray that line this week. Pray your way into Jesus' promise that by faith we are indeed baptized into the same baptism that he experienced, there by the Jordan river. God loves us beyond our power to understand.

Amen. Alleluia.