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Lectionary Year B: Isaiah 53:4-12

Something that's easy to talk about but requires a lifetime to learn is *perspective*. Where we often lack perspective is in the importance of ourselves. Everything from minor aches and pains to career struggles to interpersonal squabbles can assume a far greater importance in our lives than they ought to assume. Our "issues" deserve center-stage attention, so we think, because nothing could possibly be more important than our ache, pain, problem, or gripe.

But we can think, too, of the *real* hardships that we've faced, where it is *good* for us to have a network of supportive friends and family to surround us with their prayers and compassion. It is also proper for us to, as in Old Testament times, express genuine *lament* amid these circumstances, especially in light of the losses we've suffered due to the pandemic. Allow me to make it *extremely* clear that these are *not* the sorts of circumstances and phenomena I'm talking about here. Mature people, for the most part, can distinguish between things that are genuine hardships and things that are not.

That's where *perspective* comes into play. People with perspective realize that theirs are not the only problems and that there are other, more important, issues to tend to. Now, from this discussion we should omit, as I've suggested, persons with *genuine* problems. For example, if you're undergoing cancer treatment, you're maybe not able to see very far *beyond*

yourself because both the disease and its treatment are taking a tremendous toll on you. When your health is compromised, the ability to give of yourself is compromised. That's just the way it is.

For the remainder of us, though, what can we point to? We certainly haven't been given much encouragement in our media and culture to divert the focus away from ourselves. Nowadays, it seems we're more encouraged to "indulge" or "treat ourselves," or, worst of all, "look out for Number One." What, then, does that do to our perspective? That's quite clear. You as an individual, with all of your personal baggage, should be the most important item on the agenda. Don't worry about what's best for everyone; rather, simply expect the camera to focus on you...and stay there.

With such a mentality, we see *reward* and, ultimately, *triumph* coming to us because our perspective has become as distorted as our egos have become inflated. But such distortion in perspective basically means a loss of perspective. You no longer *know* what's important because now *you* are the only thing that's important.

I trust that it's clear for us as Christians that neither reward nor triumph come, in the end, through service to self. If we practice what we preach, then aches, pains, problems, and gripes do not take center stage. The life of a Christian is, indeed, the exact opposite. Our neighbor is more important than our personal issues, and having the perspective to realize that means not only having maturity, but also having faith.

The Servant Songs in the book of Isaiah, one of which we hear in today's First Reading, speak at length of suffering but little of the sufferer's actual feelings. The Suffering Servant, as he is called here, is not so much an actual *person* but rather a *personification* of the nation of Israel. Israel is the servant and the suffering is done on behalf of not the Israelites alone, but of all the nations...including those who oppressed Israel. Thus, God makes redemption of the nations possible through the suffering of Israel. (This idea of many people being redeemed through one person's suffering is repeated in the New Testament, if you've been paying attention all these years!)

Many Christian interpreters see – what is for them – a more obvious parallel to the person of Jesus Christ. And that should be of no surprise to us – after all, who do *we* think of when we hear these words?

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

By a perversion of justice he was taken away.

Who could have imagined his future?

For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people (Isaiah 53:7-8).

The concept of an innocent lamb sent to slaughter – along with taking the penalty for someone else’s sins – seems a bit too similar to Christ’s crucifixion for us to ignore. But what needs to be made clear is the degree to which the Servant, whether Israel or Christ, is completely without reward to self. We’re used to something quite different; simply put, we work and we get paid for it. The Servant of Isaiah, chapter 53, on the other hand, undergoes horrific torture and – on top of that – the reward goes not to him but to someone else.

Think about this: You suffer for your neighbor. Your neighbor is blessed. And you? Well, you’re just damaged goods. But the knowledge alone that, in God’s eyes, your suffering was not in vain points *beyond* that injustice and to the eventual reign of justice that God will bring in the end. It takes quite a bit of faith to swallow that, though. You’d have to know that God defeats death by the death of his Son – and no, we aren’t even remotely capable of a sacrifice as great as that – but we are people of faith and therefore able to put any situation, no matter how bad it may seem, into perspective.

It may sound obvious, but it’s true. Ours is not the only suffering that has been suffered. Ours is not the only ache or pain that has been lamented. Ours is not the only problem that has been grieved. Ours is not the only gripe that has been aired. Yet you’ll never get *beyond* any of these unless you put your aches, pains, problems, or gripes into perspective.

Beyond merely “putting things in perspective,” though, God gives us a promise that doesn’t stop at *your suffering is not in vain*...indeed, God promises *triumph* over suffering. It’s the Easter story. Christ is raised from the dead and ascends to his heavenly Father as a

testament to not only *endurance* but also *victory*. Think about that for a moment. “Endurance” says you made it. “Victory” says you won. We may not always see that victory day to day, but it remains God’s surest promise.

The Servant, too, was not without a promise. Our text says, “The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous...” (Isaiah 53:11b). Prophets have long been known for casting gloomy predictions of the future, but when I hear this, I’m inclined to think differently. There is no reason to lose hope because someday it’ll be clear that God will have transformed the world. And that transformation will happen through the work of him who did the hardest work of all – indeed, the One who suffered and died for you and me.

“The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous...”

Now think of how great this is and of how miniscule our gripes, squabbles, and achy backs are by comparison. A favorite sixteenth century religious reformer of mine, Martin Luther, has some pithy words to this effect from his *Meditation on Christ’s Passion*: “If pain or sickness afflicts you, consider how paltry this is in comparison with the thorny crown and the nails of Christ” (*Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, p. 171). Remember, too, that for as cruel and unusual as this may sound, we always need a little reminder to look beyond ourselves and to our neighbor and, ultimately, to Christ. But what makes this difficult is the countless ways in which we have been led to think otherwise – to focus on *me*, to dwell on *my* situation, and to be ego-centric. We are the *customer* awaiting yet another opportunity to consume instead of the *servant* awaiting the opportunity to serve. But – guess

what – God calls us away from all our selfish interests and all the things that we, through our own distorted perspectives, have wrongly attached importance to.

Which leads us to consider how faith can change that distorted perspective...

If we truly believe in the triumph over sin and death as revealed in Jesus Christ, we *can* get beyond ourselves and see a more positive future than we're inclined to see right now...even in an uncertain 2021 that follows a disastrous 2020! But this will require us to have some *perspective* – perspective that sees *neighbor* as more important than *self* and *God* as more powerful than *us*. As for the latter, look at what *God has done* and think of what *God can do*. The Servant knew that *his* calling was *God's* calling, and, therefore, he had better get his ego out of the way and let God do his work. As for us, it isn't much different...we just need to back off and let God take center stage!

We are God's vessels as well as stewards – not masters – of his precious gifts. Therefore, God takes center stage whenever we decide what to do with those gifts. With this in mind, we offer God our best and let God do his work with our hearts, hands, and voices.

Amen.