



HOLY COMMUNION AND EPIPHANY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder, Guest Lectionary Commentator
Professor, Belmont University, (School of Religion) Nashville, TN

Lection – Isaiah 53:1-9 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? (v. 2) For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. (v. 3) He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account. (v. 4) Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. (v. 5) But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. (v. 6) All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (v. 7) 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. (v. 8) 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. (v. 9) They made his grave with

the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Holy Communion *commemorates* Jesus' redeeming grace, *celebrates* God's limitless love, and *anticipates* the day when the faithful will eat and drink at heaven's welcome table. Bread, wafers, or crackers represent Jesus' broken body. The use of wine or (more commonly) grape juice symbolizes his shed blood.

The various designations of Holy Communion include: the Lord's Supper, the Last Supper, and the Eucharist. The term "Eucharist" is derived from a Greek verb meaning "to give thanks" (*eucharisteō*). Across the centuries, Christians have come to the communion table with great gratitude for Jesus' ultimate sacrifice at Calvary.

Among African Americans, this gratitude expresses itself creatively. For some African American congregations, Holy Communion is a solemn occasion with exquisite attention to detail. Deacons or stewards are meticulously dressed in black, and missionaries and deaconesses or members of the Altar Guild wear white. The white linen cloth covering the elements on the communion table is carefully removed and folded. The distribution of the elements proceeds with military precision. Trays of bread and cups move seamlessly from the pastor to the lay leaders to the congregation, as soft organ music floats through the sanctuary.

In other African American congregations, Holy Communion is a more festive affair. As the meal is being distributed, a sainted elder in the congregation shouts the familiar words of a song, such as, "I know it was the blood for me." Then the organist, choir, and entire congregation lift that song until hands start clapping; feet begin tapping; bodies begin swaying; tambourines start rattling; and souls get happy: "I know it was the blood...they pierced him in His side...He never said a mumblin' word...He hung His head and died...He's coming back again...one day when I was lost He died upon the cross...I know it was the blood for me." In the folk language of our ancestors, this beloved song narrates the Lord's suffering, death, and certain return.

Whether the atmosphere is solemn, festive, or a creative combination of the two, the person officiating at the Communion Table—usually the pastor—speaks passionately about the forgiveness and grace that come from Jesus' suffering on the cross—suffering prophesied by Isaiah 53:1-9.¹

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Isaiah 53:1-9

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Acts 2:46 suggests that early Christians shared Holy Communion daily, while Acts 20:7 records the weekly celebration of this sacred meal. My own background reflects these different understandings about how frequently Holy Communion should be served. I was ordained in a Baptist church in the South that observed Holy Communion at the end of the second Sunday

morning service. The Midwest congregation where I worshiped while in seminary observed Holy Communion as a separate monthly evening service. Today I am Associate Pastor of a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) congregation that hosts the Lord's Table weekly in the middle of the morning worship service.

Holy Communion as an "ordinance" or "sacrament" is in many ways related to the frequency of its observation and its placement in the worship service. For the most part, those who observe Communion as an "ordinance" host the Lord's Table monthly, while those who employ "sacrament" language serve Holy Communion more often. Both approaches affirm this celebration as crucial to the development of Christian faith. Whether we partake of Holy Communion once a week, once a month, or even once a year, we are still reminded of the Suffering Servant who lived, died and rose again that we might be redeemed from sin once and for all!

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Isaiah 53:1-9 is a part of Deutero or Second Isaiah (Chapters 40-55). At this stage in the prophecy, God tells Israel that it has paid double for its sins and will receive comfort. The historical framework for this text is approximately 540 BCE. Israel is nearing the end of the Babylonian exile. The return to Jerusalem is imminent. Yet while on the verge of deliverance, Israel neither sees the end nor senses God's presence.

There are four "Servant Songs" that speak to Israel or Jacob as God's chosen servant who must bear the consequences of its own wrongdoing and also bring justice to and for the nations (Isaiah 42:1-4, 49:1-6, 50:4-11, 52:13-53:12). Israel in Isaiah 53:1-9 suffers on behalf of others in order to atone for sins and redeem the nations.

As noted, this last "Servant Song" begins at 52:13 and divides into three literary stanzas: 52:13-15, 53:1-9, and 53:10-12. In the first and last stanzas, the Lord speaks of restoring and exalting Israel, despite its agony and embarrassment. In the middle stanza, those speaking are the ones for whom Israel suffers. This middle stanza further divides into three sections: vv. 1-3, 4-6, and 7-9. The sections are full of irony. What occurs is the opposite of what is perceived and expected.

In vv. 1-3, the nations express disbelief about God's promise to restore Israel. There is a rumor afoot about the restoration of Israel's splendor. Nevertheless, Israel's troubled past and diminished present seemingly have invalidated hope in this promise. Yet the people concede that God is strong enough to accomplish this; for there is wonder-working power in "the arms of the Lord" (v. 1). The divine irony is that God daringly *uses* what appears to others as *useless*.

Verses 4-6 describe the brokenness of Israel as a result of its service to God. Herein is another irony—divine purpose even in disfigurement. Out of Israel's bad condition, the nations receive good consequences. From punishment, there is peace. Suffering brings *shalom*, a state of wholeness and well-being. Through stripes and bruises, come healing.

The last section (vv. 7-9) expresses more of the ironic or peculiar nature of Israel's service to and relationship with God. Although Israel is oppressed and afflicted, it does not cry out. Its service calls it to restore justice; yet it receives no justice. While Israel dies for people, it is uprooted and cut off from humanity. Even in death, there is still no rest for Israel, for it is buried with the wicked and dishonest. There is no deceit in its mouth; however, its grave is with the deceptive.

In light of the similarities between Israel as the suffering servant and Jesus as the suffering Messiah, first century Christians interpreted Isaiah 53:1-9 for their contexts. New Testament literature alludes to and quotes excerpts from this "Servant Song" (for example, Matthew 8:17, 26:63; John 12:38; Acts 8:32-33; and 1 Peter 2:21-25). Additional parallels include Jesus' silence before Caiaphas (Isaiah 53:7; Matthew 26:63) and Joseph of Arimathea as the rich man who provides the tomb for the suffering servant (Isaiah 53:9; Matthew 27:57).

The Last Supper (Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-20) highlights the connection between Jesus and Israel as the "one" who died for the "many." Luke's Jesus declares, "This is my body, given for you." Jesus' body is akin to the "body" of Israel which bears wounds and infirmities for the nations. Matthew and Mark record these words of Jesus: "This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for the many." Israel, too, could attest that a "body" that suffers crushing and slaughtering will "bleed."

Given the emphasis on suffering in this passage, preachers need to distinguish carefully the causes and consequences of suffering. There are occasions when suffering—or at the very least struggle—can produce righteous results. But there are many other occasions when people become victims of suffering through no fault of their own, but rather through the sinful behaviors of others and the unjust structures of the society. For instance, the bodies of many black women are "stricken," "wounded," "crushed," and "bruised" in domestic violence and sexual abuse. To sanction that kind of suffering by uncritical homiletical application of Isaiah 53 is sinful!

Traditional Christian theology insists that Jesus' sacrifice brings salvation. Yet as womanist theologian JoAnne Terrell notes, the early church confessed "that Jesus death was once for all." At the Communion Table, we celebrate Jesus' sacrifice. We are not called to replicate it. Indeed, Jesus suffered once and for all so that we might become the types of sons and daughters of God who will remember his life and suffering and move boldly and continuously to alleviate suffering in the world.²

Challenge

On the cross, Jesus was despised, so that we might be valued. Jesus was rejected, so that we might be accepted. Jesus bore our infirmities, so that we might be healed. Jesus was bruised, so that we might be blessed and be a blessing to others. As we partake of his "broken body," let us strive to fix the world. As we partake of his "spilled blood," let us rid the world of bloodshed and violence.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: Hearing/reporting (v. 1); the mocking of those despising and rejecting the servant (v. 3); lamb and sheep (vv. 6-7); the silence of the servant when suffering (v. 7);

Sights: Young/tender plant (v. 2); root (v. 2); dry ground (v. 2); the servant with a plain, humble appearance (v. 2); the hiding of faces (v. 3); infirmities and diseases (v. 4); wounds and bruises (v. 5); lamb and sheep (vv. 6-7); shearers (v. 7); the grave (v. 9); and

Textures: Smooth leaves, rough ground, wooly sheep, sheared sheep.

Handling the Sacrament (A Reflection)

“...Through the sacraments, we are invited to understand that all things of this world are good enough to bear the presence of God and to deepen the relationship between heaven and earth. To glimpse the holiness of ordinary bread or wine or oil or water is to begin to suspect that holiness may be hiding in other things as well. Holiness may be lurking inside a green leaf, a clay cup, a clean sheet, a freshly sawn board; it may be just below the surface of a key, a clock, a shiny stone. To draw a line around the seven sacraments for which the church has rites is to underestimate the grace of God and the holiness of creation...

Sacraments not only hallow the stuff of the world; they also hallow our handling of that stuff. They give us something to look at, something to taste and smell, something to feel upon our skin and experience for ourselves. They give us something to do with our hands and with our bodies as well—walking up to receive communion, bending over the baptismal font, kneeling so that hands maybe laid upon our heads. We spend our whole lives learning what those sacraments mean, but the experience of them exceeds our understanding of them. Reaching out to handle God, it is we who are handled, gently but with powerful effect.”³

Notes

1. For more information on Holy Communion services, consult Segler, Franklin M., and Randall Bradley. Understanding, Preparing for and Practicing Christian Worship, 2nd ed., Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1996; and see the Cultural Resource section of this website.
2. Terrell, JoAnne Marie. Power in the Blood? The Cross in the African American Experience. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998. p. 124.
3. Brown Taylor, Barbara. The Preaching Life. Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2003. pp. 32-33.