

# Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

## September 12, 2021

### Reading I – Isaiah 50:5-9a

The Lord GOD opens my ear that I may hear;  
and I have not rebelled,  
have not turned back.

I gave my back to those who beat me,  
my cheeks to those who plucked my beard;  
my face I did not shield  
from buffets and spitting.

The Lord GOD is my help,  
therefore I am not disgraced;  
I have set my face like flint,  
knowing that I shall not be put to shame.

He is near who upholds my right;  
if anyone wishes to oppose me,  
let us appear together.

Who disputes my right?

Let that man confront me.  
See, the Lord GOD is my help;  
who will prove me wrong?

**Isaiah 50:5-9a.** Isaiah chapters 1-39 are known as First Isaiah dated about 742 BCE and are filled with hard-hitting challenges to try to call his people back to living in right relationship to God by living according to the Covenant. As we know, the Babylonians conquered Judah in 587 BCE causing much destruction—including the city of Jerusalem and the Temple. Many were carried off into exile, where they felt abandoned by God. They were in a foreign land (God was only present to them on their homeland turf), and they were brought to their knees and at the point of despair. They were not willing to admit that they had become a weak country because of the self-serving lives they were living. They forgot the common good and the command to take care of the “widow and orphan.” Today’s reading is found in the book called Second Isaiah—chapters 40-55. It is known as the book of comfort, because it focuses of the salvation that God will bring with healing and a promise that they will again return home. The opening lines of chapter 40 have God speaking to the prophet, “Comfort, give comfort to my people says the Lord. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and declare to her that her term of service is over....” We know that during the time in exile, Persia conquered Babylonia, and in 538 BCE the Persian King Cyrus released the people to go back to their homeland. Just as the Judahites felt God had punished them with the exile, so now they see God using King Cyrus to keep his (God’s) promise to let them go home.

There are four “Suffering Servant Songs” found in Isaiah—one of which is contained in today’s passage. Jewish interpreters see the nation as the suffering servant. Some scholars think the servant could be the prophet himself, and of course Christians applied the image to Christ hundreds of years later. Today’s passage is read on Good Friday and sees Jesus as the one who suffers to bring good to the many. His strength to endure humiliation, disgrace, and abuse is grounded in his conviction that God is with him. The servant willingly gives his back to those who beat him, his cheeks to those who pluck his beard, his face to be beaten and spat upon. He stubbornly trusts that the Lord will use his suffering and death to accomplish the divine purpose. The reviled one who is thought to be helpless, is really the strong one who is called to be a leader—not by retaliating or using violence, but through a new teaching that will call the people to a new way of life. He will be the shining light who teaches patience, gentleness, persistence, and faithfulness through nonviolence. (These thoughts capture the essence of what is said in the “Paulist Biblical Commentary.”)

Last week, we talked about Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Gorbachev, Angela Merkel, (Maybe Joe Biden?), and Pope Francis. Each person has served a kind of spirit that was meant to bring people together in peace. The suffering servant spoken of in today’s reading goes even deeper than that. His fidelity to God’s voice (will) brings people to the state of “shalom”—all the pieces fitting together, the ultimate fulfillment of all human longing. Perhaps we have had moments when we have felt some of that within ourselves? Have you had a glimpse of what this peace would look like and feel like in our lives? In our world?

**Responsorial Psalm – Psalm 116:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 8-9**

**R. (9) I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living.**

or:

R. Alleluia.

I love the LORD because he has heard

my voice in supplication,

Because he has inclined his ear to me

the day I called.

**R. I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living.**

or:

R. Alleluia.

The cords of death encompassed me;

the snares of the netherworld seized upon me;

I fell into distress and sorrow,

And I called upon the name of the LORD,

“O LORD, save my life!”

**R. I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living.**

or:

R. Alleluia.

Gracious is the LORD and just;  
yes, our God is merciful.

The LORD keeps the little ones;  
I was brought low, and he saved me.

**R. I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living.**

or:

R. Alleluia.

For he has freed my soul from death,  
my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling.

I shall walk before the LORD  
in the land of the living.

**R. I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living.**

or:

R. Alleluia.

**Psalm 116.** This is a thanksgiving psalm that the Jews pray during the Passover Meal. God is there for us even when we are struggling.

**Reading II –James 2:14-18**

What good is it, my brothers and sisters,  
if someone says he has faith but does not have works?

Can that faith save him?

If a brother or sister has nothing to wear  
and has no food for the day,  
and one of you says to them,

“Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well, ”

but you do not give them the necessities of the body,  
what good is it?

So also faith of itself,  
if it does not have works, is dead.

Indeed someone might say,

“You have faith and I have works.”

Demonstrate your faith to me without works,  
and I will demonstrate my faith to you from my works.

**James 2:14-18** – As we read this section from James you could almost see a competition taking place “faith” versus “works,” as if one is better than the other. Some scholars have even thought James was trying to correct a teaching from Paul (that faith only matters). However, James doesn’t write this passage as a competition between the two. He is more concerned with the practical application of *how* a Christian community conducts itself. A Christian community already has the faith established, but now as people of faith we need to be held accountable to living that faith. His example in the passage proves the point. If we are all one Christian community, connected in faith to Jesus, we

should treat each other as one. So, a person in good faith cannot say “go in peace, keep warm, and eat well” when they see the fellow Christian struggling. This kind of faith is what James refers to as dead.

Question: Accountability in itself is a great Christian practice. However, I sometimes feel we become timid of holding others accountable because we are afraid to hurt the feelings of another. What responsibility do we have to hold our Christian communities accountable to living an authentic faith?

Gospel – **Mark 8:27-35**

Jesus and his disciples set out  
for the villages of Caesarea Philippi.  
Along the way he asked his disciples,  
“Who do people say that I am?”  
They said in reply,  
“John the Baptist, others Elijah,  
still others one of the prophets.”  
And he asked them,  
“But who do you say that I am?”  
Peter said to him in reply,  
“You are the Christ.”  
Then he warned them not to tell anyone about him.

He began to teach them  
that the Son of Man must suffer greatly  
and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes,  
and be killed, and rise after three days.  
He spoke this openly.  
Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.  
At this he turned around and, looking at his disciples,  
rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan.  
You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.”

He summoned the crowd with his disciples and said to them,  
“Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself,  
take up his cross, and follow me.  
For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it,  
but whoever loses his life for my sake  
and that of the gospel will save it.”

**Mark 8:27-35.** Brian has given us background on Mark’s gospel. Written sometime between 68-73 CE for primarily a gentile audience. He portrays Jesus as the “suffering servant” spoken of in Isaiah’s servant songs. Mark’s literary device that keeps Jesus’ identity a secret is now moving toward being revealed. Wondering out loud in the presence of his disciples, the human Jesus asks who people think he is. The disciples offer some of what they have heard while traveling with him among the crowds. Perhaps John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the

prophets. But YOU, he asks, "...who do you say that I am?" His disciples have been a bit dense when it comes to understanding who he really is, but Peter is starting to get it. He replies to Jesus' question: "You are the Christ." Jesus commends him. Notice, however, that Peter has a superficial understanding. He thinks that Jesus will be a powerful leader who will throw off the Roman oppressors and restore Israel to its rightful place. So he finds Jesus' comments about suffering and death abhorrent and retorts, "No way! No Messiah of ours is going to be treated in such a way!" To his Jewish mind, someone that close to God would not be demeaned in such a way. Anyone serving God as the Messiah would have to be blessed with power, an army, and status and could not look like failure. Jesus rebukes him, calling him Satan, and lets all present know in no uncertain terms that following him does not involve a "cushy" life. It may involve suffering and even death. To be a disciple means to put serving the mission of Jesus ahead of even one's legitimate desires.

One heroic example of this is Oscar Romero, the Archbishop who was gunned down while presiding at Mass. Starting out as "company man," he served the institutional Church in El Salvador in the customary ways of being a bishop. Part of the expectation was that he would be in an alliance with the government, which was corrupt and keeping the poor subservient. Once he immersed himself in the lives of the poor and saw how fathers and brothers from poor families were taken out of their homes in the middle of the night and never returned, he had an inner conversion. He had a weekly radio program during which he challenged the injustice, the violence, and refused to spout the "party line." In the name of God he pleaded with the soldiers to stop the night raids and the killing of their brothers and sisters. He paid for his fidelity to the gospel with his life.

Another example that I think of today is Liz Cheney, who, in her fidelity to the truth and refusal to compromise was rejected by her fellow-Republicans and lost her prestigious position in the party.

Given that most of us will not be asked to make such extreme sacrifices, are there ways in which we might serve as faithful disciples in our lives? Perhaps our loving service to a neighbor in need that requires letting go of some legitimate leisure activity? Maybe contributing to an organization that serves those who need help?