

“The God of Sacrificial Love”

Series: Book of Isaiah: Learning Trust

Scripture: Isaiah 42:1-9; Mark 10:32-45
Lucy Baum



Isaiah 42: 1-9

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry out or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth, and the coastlands wait for his teaching. Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the Lord; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

This passage from Isaiah is one of four passages in Isaiah known as the “servant songs,” because they each speak of a Servant of the Lord who will be instrumental in bringing about God’s redemption for the people of Israel, and through them, for the world. These servant songs were written during the period of the Babylonian exile, when the Hebrew people faced a deep crisis of faith. The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed, the last Kings from the line of David had been defeated by the Babylonians, and they had been forced to leave their homeland to live as exiles in a strange land where the people worshipped strange gods. Yet, in the midst of this crisis, Isaiah preached a message of hope—God was not defeated, but was even now working to raise up a servant who would establish justice, restore sight to the blind, and set the captives free.

Mark 10:32-45

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, “Look, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the gentiles; they will mock him and spit upon him and flog him and kill him, and after three days he will rise again.”

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” And they said

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to him, **“Appoint us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”** But Jesus said to them, **“You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”** They replied, **“We are able.”** Then Jesus said to them, **“The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to appoint, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”**

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; instead, whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.”

These verses describe the third time in the Gospel of Mark that Jesus tells the disciples that he must be handed over to be killed and that he will rise again. Also for the third time in these verses, the disciples immediately misunderstand what Jesus means. James and John take the opportunity to ask Jesus for places of honor at his right hand and his left in his glory, but Jesus tells them they don't understand what they're asking for. The kind of glory that Jesus will claim is not that of a conquering king, but that of a suffering servant, one who does not lord it over us, but who comes to give his life for us. If we are to become like Jesus, we too must be willing to become servants of all.

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This week we are continuing our series on the book of Isaiah and learning to trust God. Last week, Rob reminded us that we can trust because we serve a God of abundance whose grace is not limited by our systems of scarcity. This week we will explore another aspect of God’s character—that of sacrificial, self-giving love.

As Kelly just read for us, our Old Testament reading this morning features the first of the “Servant Songs” from the prophet Isaiah. There are four of these songs or poems throughout the later chapters of Isaiah, and they all describe a figure whom God has chosen to bring about deliverance for God’s people, and not just for God’s people of Israel, but for all the nations of the earth.

Here in these verses, the servant is described as a leader who will bring forth justice, open the eyes of the blind, and set the prisoners free. And, the first people to hear these words were the Hebrew people living in exile in Babylon; they were indeed prisoners yearning to be set free. They had been taken captive by the Babylonians and hauled away from their homeland with no idea when they might be able to return, or if they would be allowed to return at all. It is hard to overstate how earth-shattering the experience of the exile was-- Jerusalem had been overthrown and the temple had been destroyed and the people were living through a deep crisis of faith, looking for some sign that God had not utterly abandoned them to misery and defeat.

Against that backdrop, it’s easy to imagine what sort of leader the exiles might have hoped for. Babylon was the most powerful empire the world had ever seen when Isaiah wrote these words, so clearly, someone with the power to set the captives free and bring justice for the nations would need to be someone with the military might and diplomatic prowess to go head-to-head with the Babylonian emperor Nebuchadnezzar himself.

And yet, that is not the figure that Isaiah describes. He is not an ambitious politician or a victorious military figure. He is a servant, someone so meek and mild he never even raises his voice. In fact, in the later servant songs, Isaiah will go on to describe this leader as one who has been mocked and rejected by others, one who is acquainted with suffering and familiar with sorrow. This Servant of the Lord stands in sharp contrast with Nebuchadnezzar and the other rulers of his day. Nebuchadnezzar was a man of great power who ruled by right of conquest. He ruthlessly put down rebellions and plundered the ancient world of its treasures,

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demanding tribute from any nation he conquered and using the loot to fund his own construction projects. Babylon was wealthy and prosperous, full of temples and palaces, Nebuchadnezzar built the famous hanging gardens of Babylon, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, but its splendor was built on the backs of those who had been defeated. Nebuchadnezzar was the kind of man who *seized* what he wanted and used violence and fear to keep it once he had it. He was, in short, a bully, and that was the kind of leadership that was rewarded by his ancient culture. And the Israelites had been living in exile amongst that culture for a generation. That was part of the brilliance of the Babylonian conquest strategy—one way to make sure a conquered population never revolts is to force them to assimilate. Uproot them from their homes and bring them to live in your glittering city. Force them to live in the shadow of the Temple of Marduk while their memories of the temple in Jerusalem grow fainter with each passing year. For a generation or more, the Hebrew people had been totally immersed in a giant propaganda campaign where the message couldn't be any clearer: might makes right, the powerful can take what they want and crush anyone who stands in their way.

But God is not a bully. God speaks to the prophet Isaiah and calls him to proclaim a message that is radically countercultural in the very heart of Babylon: It is the *suffering servant* whom God has ordained to bring about rescue and redemption for the people of Israel. Whereas Babylon produced a tyrant who grabbed for power with both hands, God chooses a humble servant and says to him, **“I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people.”**

In Babylon when a new King was crowned, part of the coronation ritual was for the new King to enter the great temple in the center of the city, where the statue of Marduk, the chief Babylonian god, was kept, and the new King would grasp the statue by the hand as a way of symbolizing his divine right to rule. Notice how Isaiah turns that ritual on its head. God says to the servant, **“I have taken you by the hand.”** The servant of the Lord does not grab for power with his own hands, but it is the living God of Israel who takes the servant by the hand. The servant's hands are gentle. So gentle that he will not break a bruised reed, so mild that he will not quench a dimly burning wick, so humble he will not even raise his voice in the street. God's message couldn't be any clearer—My power does not work like human power. I do not crush the weak, I stoop down to serve them. I do not take what I want, I offer all that I have. I am not a bully who will demand your tribute or your fear or your flattery. I am the Lord, and my power is shown forth in self-giving love.

Let's leave the prophet Isaiah and fast forward about 600 years to our passage from the gospel of Mark. Jesus is on the road toward Jerusalem with the disciples, and the Hebrew people are once again living under the

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thumb of the most powerful empire the world had ever seen. Instead of Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon, they had Caesar in Rome, but otherwise the playbook of the Empire looked very similar. Caesar was the kind of man who *seized* what he wanted and used violence and fear to keep it once he had it. He was a bully, and that was the kind of leadership that was rewarded by his ancient culture. And the Hebrew people had been living under Roman occupation for a generation or more. That was part of the brilliance of the Roman conquest strategy—one way to make sure a conquered population never revolts is to send a military force to occupy their land and set up a puppet ruler who will do your bidding and collect your taxes. The message couldn't be any clearer: might makes right, the powerful can take what they want and crush anyone who stands in their way.

It's a seductive message, especially when it seems that there aren't any viable alternatives to that kind of power. So, as the disciples are walking along the road to Jerusalem with Jesus, James and John see an opportunity to seize some power of their own. They are hoping that Jesus is going to make his move any day now, declare himself a challenger to Rome, and usher in a new Israelite Kingdom, they've been so steeped in the dominating messages of Rome that that's the kind of Messiah they're expecting. We do it too, sometimes we are tempted to think that the answer to a bully is to find a bigger bully. So, James and John reach for what they want with both hands: **“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you. . . . Appoint us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”** That's what you have to do if you want to get ahead in the Empire. You've got to find your opening to get what you want before one of the other disciples gets there first. But Jesus tells them, I am not a bully. My power does not work like Roman power. My message is this, **“whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.”** Jesus has come not to seize power, but to give it away. He is not walking the road to Jerusalem to stage a conquest, he is going to Jerusalem to become a sacrificial lamb. In him, we see the fulfillment of what the prophet Isaiah spoke. He is the Lord, and his power is shown forth in self-giving love.

Fast forward 2,000 years, and here we are. The players on the world stage are different once again, but the playbook still sounds familiar. It's not hard to find bullies in the news today. The world is still full of people who are willing to use violence and fear to hold onto power. And the messaging strategy is still hard at work trying to convince us that we also need to grab for what we want and put ourselves first. But we know the truth. The world does not belong to the bullies. It belongs to God. And God's power does not work like human power. Human power takes, but God's power gives, just as Jesus gave his very self on the cross. God's power is revealed in a love so deep and so generous that it breaks the very power of death, and this is hard to believe,

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it breaks the power of death not by defeating it, but by submitting to it. Jesus did not charge into battle against the empire, he died on one of the emperor’s crosses. He is not a bigger bully. Jesus emptied himself and entered into death, and in so doing, he transformed it from the inside. The tomb becomes the cradle of new life, and the last breath of this life becomes the first breath of the new life. This is also hard to believe—that same self-giving love is so deep and so generous that God is pouring it out even now for the bullies. Even now for you and for me. Imagine what it might be like if we let it transform us from the inside, too. May it be so, amen.