

Who Has Believed?  
Isaiah 53:1  
Ash Wednesday  
February 13, 2013

*Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?*

Tonight is the first of our six midweek Lenten services that focus on our suffering Savior. In our Wednesday night services, our meditations will be based on the Fourth Servant Song of Isaiah.

This remarkable passage, which you heard earlier, was written about seven hundred years before Christ. It portrays Christ's life from the cradle to the grave, from his birth to his resurrection. It displays the suffering and glory of our Savior in a remarkably vivid and graphic manner. Particularly prominent in this reading is the description of how Christ bore our sin by his own suffering and earned forgiveness for us.

The fifteen verses of this song are like two lofty mountain peaks, each consisting of three verses. These peaks are separated by a valley, nine verses wide. The passage starts off with a three-verse description of the success and achievement of our suffering Savior.

Then the focus shifts for nine verses about Christ's humiliation – how he took our sins on himself, suffered in silence, was cut off, and was buried.

The final three verses describe how our suffering Savior fulfilled the Lord's will, accomplished our salvation, and was given the victor's reward – which he graciously shares with us.

The passage starts and ends on a note of joy at Christ's success. And in the valley between the peaks, it tells the sobering details of Christ's suffering.

The structure of this passage also parallels the church year from Transfiguration Sunday to Easter Sunday. On Transfiguration Sunday, the transfiguration of our Lord on the mountain gives us a brief glimpse of the future glory of Christ's resurrection on Easter morning. Transfiguration and Easter form the two peaks. The season of Lent is the valley in between.

It was out of his great love God gave us a vision of Christ's triumph, just before we are exposed to the gruesome details of his suffering. That vision of the triumph of Easter sustains us during the hard times of Lent and Holy Week. We begin our journey this Lent knowing that Christ's suffering will end in his death, but his death will end in resurrection and our eternal life with him.

Isaiah asks, "*Who has believed our message?*" (Is 53:1 NIV). In today's language: Who can believe it? Who can believe this astonishing message about Jesus Christ? This one

verse implies both belief and unbelief. Some people take offense at Jesus Christ. Others, by the power of the Holy Spirit, look at his life story and believe in him.

Imagine eavesdropping on two eyewitnesses talking about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. These two apparently had not believed in Christ, or at least had not understood how and why his earthly ministry would end. But now, as they look back, they do understand and they do believe.

Just for example's sake, let's imagine our two friends were the disciples on the road to Emmaus. They experienced an "unbelief to belief" shift in their lives. Listen to their story: *They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.* (Lk 24:32-35 NIV).

I would like to have listened in on their conversation as they rushed back from Emmaus to Jerusalem. "Who would have thought it? I never saw this coming. Did you think things would turn out like this? It's all so clear now. How could we have missed it?"

The last half of tonight's verse has even more to say to us. Isaiah asks: *Who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?* The message Isaiah is talking about concerns the "arm of the Lord." The arm of the Lord is God in action, God using his strength and power to accomplish salvation and deliver his people from his enemies and their enemies.

Long ago, the Lord stretched out his arm to part the Red Sea so the Israelites could walk to safety on dry land. Then the Lord struck the vast army of Egyptians, who were chasing them, so that the Egyptian army drowned in the sea. The Israelites sang: *Your right hand, O Lord, was majestic in power. Your right hand, O Lord, shattered the enemy* (Ex 15:6 NIV).

But now the arm of the Lord is being revealed in a new form. God is again reaching out to rescue his people from the forces of evil which threaten to overwhelm us. God's arm is once again in action, bringing salvation and blessing to us.

Yet the arm of the Lord now reaches out to us in such a strange form. His arm doesn't look powerful or mighty, but weak, as it takes the shape of Jesus. Looking forward through God's eyes, this is how Isaiah described our Suffering Savior.

*He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.* (Is:53:2-3 NIV)

God's salvation is being made manifest through a man who is like a tender plant struggling to survive in the bone-dry desert. This man faces opposition all around him. He is rejected, even hated – a man who is no stranger to pain and suffering. When people see this man, they hide their faces from him. They are shocked, appalled, they turn away. In this picture, he has no outward beauty or visible majesty that would attract us to him.

This is Isaiah's portrait of Jesus. He grew up like a root in dry ground. As an infant, King Herod tried to kill him, so his parents had to flee with him to Egypt. When they returned, they settled in the hostile region of Galilee. As he began his ministry, even his hometown rejected him.

Jesus went through life hungry and thirsty, tired and weary. He was badgered and harassed by the crowds, when they thought they could get what they wanted from him. He was scorned and shunned when he wouldn't give them what they demanded. His own people and even his own brothers were skeptical.

And in a way we can understand their skepticism. Jesus looked nothing like a king and he certainly didn't look like some conquering hero. A more contemporary author, the late Rich Mullins, added this to Isaiah's description.

Birds have nests, foxes have dens  
But the hope of the whole world rests  
On the shoulders of a homeless man  
You had the shoulders of a homeless man  
And you did not have a home.

Yet the prophetic message God spoke through Isaiah is that this despised, rejected, homeless man is actually the "arm of the Lord." This man of sorrows, who looks so weak, is the embodiment of God's strength and determination to save us, to deliver us from our sins. This is an astounding message. It's a paradoxical message. Who can believe it? It's incredible. It's hard to believe. Yet it is true!

I said earlier, this text is like an excerpt of a conversation between two people who maybe had trouble believing the message. Two people who are now shaking their heads and kicking themselves for not believing sooner. And they call it "our message." "Who has believed our message?"

Those two skeptics, who formerly didn't believe, believe now. They publicly confess this unbelievable message as their own. Now, their task is to proclaim this message to others – to anyone and everyone.

There is no short supply of people in this world who do not believe our message of Jesus Christ. It's easy to see why. Who wants to admit that we are sinful creatures and that our sin, if not forgiven, will forever damn us to hell? Who wants to admit that we desperately need help – someone to rescue us from what we justly deserve? What's

more, who wants to admit that we need a deliverer like the suffering Savior we see portrayed in our Scripture reading this evening?

“Who can believe it?” We can! We believe that Jesus Christ, this tender shoot, this man of sorrows, this man from whom so many people hide their faces and their hearts, is our Savior. The unbelieving world may despise and reject him. But we believe. We believe Jesus is the mighty arm of the Lord, strong to save us from our sins.