

The Servant of Isaiah – From Forgotten to Remembered
Isaiah 49:8-18
March 2, 2016
4th Wednesday in Lent

Thus says the Lord: “In a time of favor I have answered you; in a day of salvation I have helped you; I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages, saying to the prisoners, ‘Come out,’ to those who are in darkness, ‘Appear.’ They shall feed along the ways; on all bare heights shall be their pasture; they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them. And I will make all my mountains a road, and my highways shall be raised up. Behold, these shall come from afar, and behold, these from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Syene.” Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people and will have compassion on his afflicted. But Zion said, “The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me.” “Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me. Your builders make haste; your destroyers and those who laid you waste go out from you. Lift up your eyes around and see; they all gather, they come to you. As I live, declares the Lord, you shall put them all on as an ornament; you shall bind them on as a bride does.

Our Servant text for tonight depicts the whole Gospel in the person of the Servant. The servant is called “Zion” at one point in the text, and several Gospel allusions dot the prophecy before us tonight. Tonight we will look at the Gospel, and the Servant of the Lord, under the theme, “The Servant – From Forgotten to Remembered”.

This prophecy is filled with images we have come to associate with the Gospel, for example; “the day of salvation”, the covenant given to us in the person of Jesus; the springs of water, Jesus called it *living water ... a well of water springing up to eternal life* (Jn 4:14 ESV); mountains being brought down to become a road and valleys being lifted up; being inscribed on the palm of His hands; and the bride.

All of these images are familiar in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Because the Gospel, the Good News, is the victory of Christ, which he has already won, it is easy to pass right by the pain and trouble of our Lord in getting there.

Our prophecy tonight reminds us of what it must have been like for the Servant of the Lord. Isaiah gives voice to the Servant: *But Zion said, “The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me”* (Is 49:14 ESV). How do we know this prophecy is about Jesus? Remember his cry from the cross: *My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?* (Mk 15:34).

This is the sorrow that filled the heart of our Lord as he bore the wrath of God against our sins. He was alone, and although he is God, the Son was utterly alone, abandoned by the Father in his suffering on our behalf.

Surely he felt forgotten. He must have known, somewhere deep inside of him, that God would not abandon him, and yet he had to bear our human nature, too. He had to bear that sense of being alone, forsaken, forgotten. For Jesus, who was forever one with the Father and the Holy Spirit, this must have been utter torment. And he was alone, for he was facing the wrath of God over sin, and enduring our penalty in our place.

But he wasn't forgotten, and he hadn't forgotten his Father. When his undertaking was complete, and he had finished all that he had come to do, he commended his soul into the Father's hands, and died a truly human death. He died the same sort of death every man, woman, and child must one day face - the separation of body and soul.

The resurrection proves that he wasn't forgotten; he was remembered. Isaiah describes it in this prophecy in these words: *Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you* (Is 49:15 ESV).

The questions are rhetorical. Of course a woman who is nursing her child can't forget the child. Mothers are famous for their patience and compassion when it comes to their children. Sometimes they are too patient and too compassionate. Yet God says that even a mother is more likely to forget her child, sitting in her lap and nursing, than God the Father is to forget his Son. He will be more compassionate than a tender-hearted mother.

Next is where the prophecy becomes a little difficult. The prophet shifts from talking about the Servant to talking about the people of God, and he makes that change without any segue. Sometimes the same words seem to be spoken about both the servant and the people of God. That's because the Servant is the one-man representative of the entire people of God. He is Israel, and he is Zion. And so are we.

When Isaiah writes: *Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me* (Is 49:16 ESV), you can easily visualize the marks of the nails in the hands of Christ. We have truly been inscribed on the palms of his hands.

The walls the prophet describes as standing continually before the Father are the walls of Zion, the city of God, and the temple of God, which is to say, us. Peter says it clearly in his first epistle: *You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ* (1 Pe 2:5 ESV). We are that temple, and we are that Zion, and just as the Servant cannot be forgotten by the Father, so we too are forever etched on his hands and never to be forgotten.

The Servant, once forgotten and forsaken, is remembered, and we are remembered with him. That is what makes this the day of salvation, the day of salvation in which our Lord has helped us.

The Servant has made us the people who will neither hunger or thirst. He makes all his mountains a smooth road. because he doesn't bring things down to our level, but raises

us up to his level by bringing us at last into his glory in eternity. Out of the bitterness of being forsaken and forgotten, he has brought us into the splendid light of his glory.

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people and will have compassion on his afflicted (Is 49:13 ESV). The compassion of the Lord rescues us from the death we have earned by our sin. He comforts us with the promise of resurrection from our graves and life everlasting. We are the ones God is talking about when he says: *[Say] to the prisoners (those in bondage), 'Come out,' to those who are in darkness, 'Appear.' They shall feed along the ways; on all bare heights shall be their pasture; they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them* (Is 49:9-10 ESV).

The bondage of prison is the bondage of the funeral attire. It was familiar to the ancient Israelites because they would bind their dead with cloths before burial. The darkness from which the prophets says we are to be released is the darkness of the tomb. The blessedness he then describes is the blessedness of paradise, beyond death, sorrow, and all of the difficulties of this life, beyond hunger or thirst, beyond scorching heat so familiar to those who lived in the sunbaked middle east.

The final note from this prophecy is where Isaiah writes: *Lift up your eyes around and see; they all gather, they come to you. As I live, declares the Lord, you shall put them all on as an ornament; you shall bind them on as a bride does* (Is 49:18 ESV). Here he is speaking of those who gather to worship him. The image is not identical to the one we are accustomed to, but it strongly suggests the New Testament image, patterned after much in the Old Testament, of the Church as the Bride of Christ.

Our theme is, *The Servant – From Forgotten to Remembered*. We have made the transition with the Servant. He was forgotten so that we might be remembered. Now he has remembered us, and the promise set before us tonight is that we will go forth in joy with him for eternity. All of our hope and confidence rests upon the Servant, spoken of in Isaiah, and made flesh in Jesus Christ our Lord.