

The Servant of Isaiah: The Servant Blesses with Hidden Appearance
Isaiah 52:13-53:3
March 24, 2016
Maundy Thursday

Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted. As many were astonished at you – his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind – so shall he sprinkle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which has not been told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand. Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? 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, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Isaiah has set forth in his prophecy a vision of the Servant of the Lord. Tonight's prophecy tells us that the Servant is unexpected. It was true in the times before Jesus. It was true in the days that Jesus walked the earth. And it is true today.

No one was looking for the Messiah that came. They wanted something or someone grand. They wanted obvious power and visible glory. Humility is okay in its place, but Jesus was just not the kind of man they expected. Our theme tonight is "the servant blesses with hidden appearance."

Part of the people's problem was that they were really expecting just a man. They didn't expect he would actually be Immanuel, God with us. When they got God in human flesh, it was beyond their ability to accept it. They called it blasphemy.

"Doesn't God know his own limits? He is supposed to stay in the sky and thunder from the mountain tops. He is not supposed to come as a simple, ordinary man – a humble man. He's God. His glory should strut down the street gleaming with riches and shining with power. Mangers and shepherds make great stories, but God is supposed to have a little swagger."

The problem was the Servant was nothing to look at. Isaiah called that right: *He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him* (Is 53:2 ESV). He was humble, and, according to Isaiah, nothing much to look at. All of those "amazing Jesus" stories and pictures are simply a testament to how even today, the Servant who came is not the servant that people want.

Don't get me wrong, Jesus was amazing. But He clearly didn't look that way. Sure, he drew a crowd when he performed miracles, but people still thought that he could be outwitted and manipulated and even captured and killed as helpless as a lamb.

Isaiah says that the Servant will prosper. He will be high and lifted up, greatly exalted. They didn't understand that Isaiah was speaking about the cross. He was lifted up. He

was nailed to the cross and raised up so men could ridicule him. So he could prosper by dying for our salvation. That's not what anyone expected at the time.

He blessed with hidden appearance, meaning here that what looked like defeat was victory, what looked like failure was success, what looked so awful was his prospering in precisely the things the Father had given him to do.

Things are no different today. People still don't want the Christ who came. The world around us, openly unbelieving, surely doesn't want him, but that's to be expected. What's amazing is that so many of those who claim his name and tell everyone that they are his followers and his servants want nothing to do with the real Jesus.

These folks want the Jesus that comes with visible glory and impressive power. That is why the Joel Osteens of the world, who have nothing to say about the humble and suffering Jesus, have to hold services in arenas, while faithful churches dwindle on the vine. People want the pomp. People want the outward success. They want to make a good show of power and luxury, just like they did 2000 years ago.

The Servant was about humility and patiently suffering for others and humble obedience to God, even to the point of a shameful death on the cross. Church bodies and men and women who have made their fortunes on the name Christian deny the resurrection. They propose a new vision for the mission of the church. They "re-imagine" the faith and abandon Jesus because, frankly, he's not what they expect or what they want. They will not admit their sin and guilt, and so, in their minds, they have no need for a humble, suffering Savior.

Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? (Is 53:1 ESV). Isaiah wrote those words something like 2800 years ago, and they still ring new, true, and fresh as the day he wrote them. The hidden Servant is not invisible, but he's so unlike what people expect, or want, that they can't see Him.

Israel didn't want him back then, and so much that calls itself Christianity doesn't want him today. They want ease. They want comfort. They want a God who acts like they would act if they were God, big and important and throwing his weight around.

That day, of course, is coming, and when it comes they will be utterly alarmed to see it. But that day is not today. Today the Servant is humble, patient, compassionate, gentle, quietly pleading, sprinkling many nations in Holy Baptism, and appearing only to those who take him at his Word in the surprising appearance of the Holy Supper.

The Servant is Jesus. His body hidden under the form of the bread. His blood hidden under the form of the wine in the cup, just as he said on the night we commemorate tonight as Maundy Thursday. The bread and wine are still there, but by the grace and power of Christ, because he said so, his body and blood are there as well for our encouragement, forgiveness, and blessing.

But who believes that? Who sees Jesus there? We do. Lutherans do. The eyes of faith of all who believe the Word of God do. But so many do not. They simply refuse to believe it because it doesn't fit their expectations. God can't do that! He wouldn't! He would not use simple bread and wine. He cannot do it for so many for so long. You see? They want God on their terms. They want him to do things their way and not his.

Hidden appearance. *He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not* (Is 53:3 ESV).

The cross is not the way men would have done it. Men would have God just ignore sin, or wipe it out somehow. But that wasn't possible. God couldn't just ignore sin, or wipe it away like magic, because that would have made God complicit in our sin. That would have made God an accomplice, as though he wanted sin to exist. And that means his judgement that sin deserved death wasn't true or honest.

God told Adam and Eve that on the day they ate of that one fruit they would die. He announce the judgment that the soul that sins will die. The world have God be a liar, and a showboat like they are.

God did the unexpected. He did what men say is impossible, by becoming one of us, and living the life no other man has ever chosen – or can choose – a life of sinless obedience to the will of God. Having earned everlasting life and possessing the right and ability to never die, he traded his righteousness for our sin, and his life for our death. He died enduring the wrath of God against our sin.

Now the Servant holds out to us, and to all men, the gift of resurrection and everlasting life. The one that believes and is baptized shall be saved. Only those that reject his gracious gift in stubborn unbelief will face condemnation. They face it for the crime of calling God a liar and refusing to trust him, take him at His word, and believe.

Today millions of people despise him. His Word doesn't suit them. He is too much or too little for them. They want him to make their lives into their image of heaven – and they want him to leave them alone to do whatever strikes their fancy. The only time they want Jesus to pay attention to them is when they make a mess of things and find themselves in dire straits. Nothing about that has changed since Jesus walked the pathways of first century Israel.

He was *a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief*, even before His passion. But they made his life miserable for a few hours before they crucified him because he was stubbornly himself, he was faithful to the will of his Father, and because all that he endured was necessary for our salvation.

In his life on this earth and in the Holy Supper, the Servant blesses with hidden appearance. Tonight we celebrate that blessing, and we thank God for his faithful and obedient Servant, and all that he has won for us.