

Isaiah 53:7-9

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. 8 By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. 9 They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

We continue our series this morning, reviewing the suffering servant hymn in Isaiah 52 and 53 line-by-line, bringing that text into conversation with Jesus' journey towards the cross. Today we read Isaiah 53:7-9 in light of Jesus' third and final declaration to the disciples that he must be betrayed, killed and raised in Luke 18. Like the disciples, we have a hard time seeing God's purposes sometimes. This is not an accident. Sometimes, God uses our blind spots to show us who God truly is, fundamentally changing who we are. Let's hear Luke's witness in chapter 18, starting in verse 31.

Luke 18.31-34

31 Jesus took the twelve aside and told them, "You need to understand, we're going to Jerusalem, and everything written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. 32 He will be betrayed, handed over to the Gentiles, ridiculed, robbed of dignity, and spat upon. 33 Having scourged and beaten him, they will put him to death, and on the third day, he will be raised up."

34 But they understood none of these things; moreover, what he was telling them was hidden from them, so they couldn't grasp what was said.

The Word of God for the people of God...

Who Could Have Imagined?

A January 3, 2017 article in the *New York Times* featured the story of Timothy Shahid and Joshua Kalina of Topeka, Kansas.¹ Timothy came from a rough background. Adopted later in life, he harbored a great deal of pain and rejection. Out of control by 14, Timothy robbed a pawnshop and spent two years in juvenile detention. Out at 16, he began carrying a pistol with him. A few years later, he had centered his life on getting stoned and drinking. Joshua, son of Judi Bergquist, was a prankster. Diagnosed with severe ADD, he was forced into an alternative high school where he met a “rougner” group of friends with which he was close. His relationship with his family was strained. On April 23, 2007, Timothy and Joshua met for the first time through a friend.

They got along well at first. They rode around that night, going from club to club. As their drinking increased, their easy friendship turned into argument. Timothy and Joshua left the club. When Joshua got in, Timothy began to walk away. Their mutual friend began arguing with Timothy. Timothy thought the friend had a gun. A shootout ensued.

¹ Timothy Williams, “When Killer and Victim’s Mother Meet, Paths From Grief, Fear and Guilt Emerge,” *New York Times*, Jan. 3, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/03/us/when-killer-and-victims-mother-meet-paths-from-grief-fear-and-guilt-emerge.html>

Timothy ran up to Joshua and shot him multiple times, hitting him four times in the chest. Timothy got away. Joshua, unarmed, was dead.

After Timothy was arrested and put on trial, he said that he no longer cared for his life, and felt dead inside. During one court appearance, he pulled out a picture of Joshua, turned around and held it up to Judi, Joshua's mom, and laughed. Judi was overwhelmed with anger and despair. Her grief was so great, she began to lose her memory and couldn't sleep. She said that every time she saw someone that resembled Timothy, she would go into a full-blown panic attack.

For years after Timothy's conviction, Judi struggled with the question, "why?" Actually, "why" is a default question, our attempt to find some handhold, some sense of control; a last ditch effort against the cold numb of loss. In her case, Josh's death was so pointless. Who could imagine such a thing happening to a loved one, or even themselves? We aren't born with the equipment to process this kind of pain. We are bad at tragedy. Deep down, we know things ought not be this way. We scramble to patch alternate narratives together to claw back meaning from what seems so plain.

In this kind of cold numb, we walk alongside the disciples as they listen to Jesus tell them for the final time what lies ahead in Jerusalem. They are so close now, and time is short. Maybe they will understand now. To them, his words are confusing, just a bag of mixed messages. How can he possibly mean such a thing? Who could imagine a Messiah like this? He has been healing people, casting out evil spirits, filling their hearts with the hope of the coming of the kingdom of God. He's shown such power, even telling

the rich they should sell their possessions and give them to the poor. Like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus a little later in Luke, they are sure he is the one to set things right and do for them and for Israel what they had always dreamed. Peter is so convinced, he even has the audacity to remind Jesus back in verse 28 that they've given up everything for Him. He's so sure of what Jesus can and will do, he just wants to remind him who his true friends are.

But here Jesus goes again with these mixed messages. Suffering. Ridicule. Death. Who could imagine such things for the Promised One? Who knows, maybe he's speaking in code. Maybe he's talking about the coming battle. Sure, we'll have to suffer in the trenches, so to speak, but the time for settling scores draws near. Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, Rome in ruins for what it has done. Maybe this is what Isaiah meant. We have been oppressed. We have been led to slaughter. We have been silenced as the nations pervert justice. We have had our national grave dug for us time and again.

But rationalize Jesus' words all they like, not only did they not understand him, they were kept from understanding. I like how one commentator put it: "Sometimes truth has a time lock. Even new wine cannot be drunk before its time!"² Sometimes, and because the time is not right, or because we lack the key insight or experience or perspective to unlock the mystery, we find ourselves in the in-between – in-between loss

² R. Alan Culpepper, "Luke," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, Abingdon Press, 1995, p. 352.

and restoration, in-between grief and joy, in-between questions and answers, in-between hope and fulfillment. In the in-between, sure, we have the pieces; sure, we have what Isaiah tells us and what Jesus promises, yet we remain in the shadowlands, our hearts broken by pain and minds made up about the cold, hard facts. Yet, God is present in the in-between, in the shadowlands, maybe keeping us from seeing rightly for a season, but also waiting to act, waiting to shatter our preconceptions, waiting to surprise us in the broken places so we can finally see who He is as He works His “all things together for our good” plans. (Rom. 8:28)

In the in-between, the disciples can't see that by his affliction, his silent and compassionate suffering, and his death as Isaiah tells us, God would not only fulfill every promise, but in the beatings, in the humiliation, in the nail scarred hands, God would accomplish our rescue from the powers of sin and death. They couldn't fathom a rolled away stone on the third day; dead people stayed dead! They couldn't imagine his resurrected presence and the power of His Spirit sending them, at first, into panic, but finally to the ends of the earth to proclaim a crucified yet victorious King. They didn't have the key yet. They were going to wade into the waters of suffering with him as he shouldered our burdens and took the wounds of the world upon himself. They would have to walk with him to Jerusalem and experience these things so that when he walked through the other side of death, they could be bold witnesses to all they saw. Dead people stay dead, but in this case, something new has happened. Some like Cleopas would even have to walk back from Jerusalem, crushed by the loss only to find he was walking

with them all along. Bedrock Peter would have to face up to his own cowardice and denial so he would have the courage for God's plans for him.

You see, our pain eventually reveals the mysterious power of God. The secret of God's redemptive love in Jesus is that God is able to take on and soak up our brokenness, our violence and hostility, and rather than give it back in equal measure like we deserve, God the Son is able to take it into Himself and transform it, transmute it by His boundless love. The mystery of the grace present in the cross and the empty tomb is the mystery of how pain and sorrow becomes the well-spring of healing and joy **because God has purposed to love us more than punish us; heal us rather than leave us to our wounds.** Who could imagine such things?

Certainly not the disciples. Certainly not us. Certainly not Timothy and Judi. A few years passed after the trial. Timothy got twenty years without parole, and Judi was a wreck. This is how such stories eventually end. Yet, through the work of some evangelists and Timothy's 23 hours a day of solitary, despair and guilt drove him to pick up a Bible. Timothy became a Christian. Judi wrestled mightily, alternating between grief and trying to find hope. Her last stitch of faith drove her to Holly Chavez, the faith-based restorative justice coordinator for the Kansas Department of Corrections. She wanted to meet Timothy, so they began the painful work of preparation. Everyone was required to take a hard look at themselves. Judi had to stop idealizing her son. Timothy had to own up that he was a murderer. She sent him pictures of Joshua and a video of the funeral, as well as the bloodstained t-shirt. Timothy, as per the program, had to take it all in without pushback.

He saw Joshua's dead body on the screen. He held the shirt. Reality began to set in. When they finally met, everyone immediately broke into tears. Timothy apologized profusely between sobs. Judi forgave him. They have a relationship to this day, a new thing no one could foresee.

Who could have imagined such a thing? Only in the economy of God's grace is such a thing possible. Only under the power of God's purposes through His Son are our wounds absorbed and healed. Only in the in-between loss and restoration are we invited to present our wounds, and in hope of the third day, transform that violence and suffering and death into sources of forgiveness, newness of life, and renewed creation. This is exactly what the Christian life is all about, and what Paul means in 2 Cor. 5:17 that we are new creatures if we are in Christ.

Maybe from your vantage point this morning, you don't feel new; you see no path through the shadowlands. Maybe your grief is so deep, words aren't enough. Maybe you feel a bit like Peter, and the world and God's promises just don't add up; you don't understand. Maybe you can't imagine the future anymore under your crushing load. Maybe a crucified Messiah isn't what you think you need right now.

I understand, I do. I even imagine Jesus tilting his head a bit at his thick disciples, loving them despite their lack of understanding. He understands. But here's the thing to remember as you wrestle: there's only One who could possibly know what you are feeling, and it is the One who experienced everything Isaiah has been talking about, even at the cost of his life. There is no other who can or will know you better than you know

yourself because in Jesus, God has done more than just imagine, more than just sympathize, more than just empathize with you. No, he's taken it onto himself, promising to take our brokenness into his love and, by grace, reshape it, give it life, and make us new. To give us a future. To give us hope. To take our lack of imagination and show us the width and length and height of His love in Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 3:18)