**Isaiah 53:3-6**(Passion Reading Lk 23:39-54); Mid-week Lent 3; Feb 24, 2016

**Now I Understand Why**

Once in a while, going through the channels, we happen upon Antique Roadshow, and we have to watch for a few minutes. Will this bizarre antique be a run-of-the-mill antique worth $50, if you can find the right buyer? Or will it turn out to be a $50,000 artifact? Sometimes you get really surprised.

God’s prophets had many things to say about the Suffering Servant. In our mid-week lenten sermons we look at six things those prophets said. We could look at sixteen. There are many. None of them is without great value. But this one tonight is that priceless artifact. This one is the crown jewel of prophecies of the Messiah.

The reason it is so important is that it is the clearest answer to the question “Why?” In other weeks we look at the “Whens” and “Whos” and “In What Ways?” about Jesus’ death. But through Isaiah, long before it happened, God answered the question “Why?”

God explained it long before it happened because he knows how we are. We like to invent “reasons” that agree with our opinions. If God didn’t answer the “Why?” of the most important event of Jesus’ life, we would invent all kinds of answers that fit with our own view of the way things should be.

So great is our human desire to square the universe with our thinking, that even though God clearly told the world why the Suffering Servant would die, even though he told us before he did it, and even though it happened just like he said it would, even so we people are so stubborn that we still insist on having it our way.

Ever been there with someone who says, “Yah, that’s why you think Jesus came, but there are so many different understandings”? If so, then remember that the New Testament uses Isaiah 53 more than any other part of the Old Testament to explain Jesus. It’s like two lenses. If you hold them in exactly the right distance from each other, you have a telescope, and suddenly you see things you could never have seen. This chapter is one of those places where the New and Old converge and give us the clearest possible high definition picture of God’s purpose in the Suffering Servant. It is one of perhaps five or six places in the Bible that we should know, places we could open our Bibles to, if no other.

Well, why did Jesus suffer? This is not something we naturally understand. Our default, natural position with the Suffering Servant is described in the first verse of our reading. ***“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.”***

It is the response, the world over, to people who suffer bad things. It is assumed that when bad things happen, you must have done something to deserve it. Maybe you have said it. “He had it coming.” And the reason people say this is because often (though by no means always) this is true. Doing bad things often does lead to problems. And that was the assumption when people walked by Jesus’ cross on their way through the gates of the city of Jerusalem. They thought, they even said it, “Well, another of the scum of society getting what he deserves.”

Verse 3 betrays that natural human viewpoint. ***“He was despised, and we esteemed him not.”*** The New Living Translation captures it well, *“and we did not care.”* This is the assumption, “Yes, he was despised. He suffered. But you know what? You sow what you reap, you get what you deserve, the chickens come home to roost. What sort of people do you think end up on death row?” That’s our natural position.

It was the great scandal of talking about Jesus in the first century. “You want me to believe in a man who was executed on a cross? You say he was a righteous man? You say he is my Savior? The only people I have ever known to be on death row were people who had it coming!” ***“We esteemed him not.”*** Even if we are naturally sympathetic toward him, we cannot without the Holy Spirit revealing it to us, ever understand that his suffering is directly connected to us. Even if he is being punished wrongly, that was half a planet away, two millenia before I was born. What does it have to do with me?

But the prophet will not give up so easily. He puts another piece of evidence in front of us. ***“He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows.”*** He wasn’t getting what he deserved, he was doing something for us. The prophet insists that there is some connection between this lonely man dying on a tree and us. Ok. Then maybe he was some sort of sympathetic do-gooder. The sort of person who wants to get involved, to show solidarity with us.

But the prophet won’t leave us alone. He keeps picking at the scab. He wants us to understand. It’s not just that he took up our sorrows, but ***“He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities.”*** This Suffering Servant is not just a sympathetic friend. *We* did the crime, *he* did the time.

There is a special kind of horror movie. It’s vaguely there in the back of my mind but I can’t remember it. It is not the blood and guts and violence sort of movie. It is a different kind. It is about the story of one person’s life. Over the years, many things go wrong. At first the person thinks it is just “bad luck”. After decades, in a single moment, the person suddenly realizes that all the bad things that have happened in life—to his parents, friends, co-workers, to everybody around him, again and again over the years—all of it, is because of him. Suddenly reality comes crashing down. As he looks at the continual slide toward chaos for everyone and everything around him, he realizes it is his fault.

We did the crime. ***“We all, like sheep, have gone astray, eachof us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”*** He did the time. Why does he suffer on yonder tree? It is because of me. It’s because I chose to go my own way. It’s because I chose to do what I wanted to do. My selfishness, my laziness, my obsession with work over people, my anger, my worry, my envy, my idolatry. He is not some unknown victim I hear about on the news. He is someone who died because of me. I was the shooter, I was the driver, I was the abuser—me.

Do you see the change from where we started out? In verse 3 we looked on one suffering, as we might watch suffering on news report: detached, concerned only until we turned the channel. And then we became aware he was doing something that was somehow connected with us. And then we became aware it was because of us. Finally, we became aware that it was our choices that brought all of this on him. He suffers, because of my life.

If I had not been, his suffering would have been less!

Yet, he, Jesus, knew that. And he still went to the cross for me. I am why Jesus, God’s Son, had to suffer. But he knew that. He knew it 700 years before he suffered. He knew it well before then, from eternity. The Suffering Servant did it because he knew that ***“the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”*** More than anything, he wanted peace and healing for us. Thank you Jesus.

Now I understand why. Amen.