

The servant who perseveres (Isaiah 50:4-9a)

Isaiah's suffering servant plays on our own ambivalent ideas about violence, passivity, and retribution.

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March 23, 2018

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In his autobiography *I Never Had it Made*, Jackie Robinson describes a “wild and rage-crazed minute” in his first, most traumatic and abusive season as the first black Major League baseball player. Under vicious heckling from the opposing dugout, he thinks,

To hell with the image of the patient black freak I was supposed to create. I could throw down my bat, stride over to that Phillies dugout, grab one of those white sons of bitches and smash his teeth in with my despised black fist. Then I could walk away from it all. I'd never become a sports star. But my son could tell his son someday what his daddy could have been if he hadn't been too much of a man.

The moment passed, and Robinson continued to pay the price of excruciating equanimity—required of no one else in his game—in order to play. As his own recollections and subsequent experience made clear, however, this was not a story of mere forbearance and uplift.

The patient suffering of the servant in today's Isaiah passage is similarly ambivalent, and it plays on our own ambivalent ideas about violence, passivity, and retribution:

“I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.” Yet this is not just meekness, and it is not even charity: “I have set my face like flint...Who will contend with me?”

The moral strength of the prophet here is not a human virtue, but a divine gift. It is not an idealization of suffering in the abstract, or of passivity in the face of cruelty or injustice. The servant’s endurance may be the only path open to him. It has been easy, in American history, to construe the nonviolence of the powerless as an obligatory virtue rather than a desperate necessity. The servant has a natural right, so to say, to resist his tormentors, just as Jackie Robinson had a natural right to fight back against vicious taunts. Just as Jesus had a natural right to evade or resist the dehumanizing horror of crucifixion.

So the refusal to do so does not disclose a new command. It points to something other and greater than the virtue of simply absorbing punishment. The servant, after all, expects to be vindicated. And the servant has a job to do—to “sustain the weary with a word.” The perseverance of the servant is a powerful witness, to the weary and the persecutor alike.

In the context of Palm/Passion Sunday, we are of course invited to hear Jesus in this passage. And so Jesus is more than one who submits to the blows. In doing so he affirms his identification with all those to whom the servant is sent—not just the ones who choose not to fight back against their oppressor, but the ones who have no way to do so.