

The suffering human (Isaiah 52:13-53:12)

Exiled Israel, the crucified Christ, and the thread that holds two interpretations together.

by [Melissa Florer-Bixler](#)

April 17, 2019

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

It is no surprise that the editors of the lectionary assign Isaiah's "suffering servant" passage for Good Friday. The tradition of finding in the prophet's words an image of Jesus, crucified on the cross, goes back to the early church (see Acts 8:32-35).

In Isaiah's prophecy itself, the servant is exiled Israel, living in Babylon as she awaits the Lord's redemption. There's a thread that holds these two interpretations together—but when the church tries to sweep aside Isaiah's own context, the reality of the ancient people to whom God sent him, we lose that thread.

Herbert McCabe, in an essay reflecting on Good Friday, [reminds us](#) that we live in a world in which it "is dangerous, even fatal, to be human; a world structured by violence and fear." Jewish people, who are among the world's historic victims of unfounded fear and hatred, know well what it means to be swept up in the violence of the world. People get swept up in this violence all the time, even those who bear the seal of God's covenant love.

"My thesis," writes McCabe, "is that Jesus died of being human." To be human in the world, to refuse "to evade the consequences of being human in an inhuman world," gets people killed.

When I read this passage from Isaiah, I do not hear Jesus displacing the Israel to whom the passage is addressed. Together the exile of Israel and the crucifixion of

Jesus tell me that instantiations of God's persistent love—in an ancient covenant people, in God's own son—are a threat to the powers of the world. From this line I can trace the long line of the world's many victims—those who, because of love and the threat that it poses, could not be allowed to exist.

“He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised; and we held him of no account.” These are words for undocumented people living in sanctuary in church buildings, for activists working to end police brutality in their counties, for aid workers caught in the crossfire of political violence. Just as Israel faced exile, Jesus is also a victim of the world, the line of God's embodiment of love making its way through him. Love gets caught up in the web of violence that crisscrosses human history.

On the cross, Jesus takes this brokenness of human history upon himself. It is a complete and perfect act of love to break the power of death forever. It is on the cross that love, and not victimization, has the final say.