April 2, Good Friday (Isaiah 52:13-53:12; John 18:1-19:42)

How does Isaiah's Suffering Servant compare to John’s Jesus?

by Wes D. Avram in the March 10, 2021 issue

Reading Isaiah on Good Friday gives us a lens, even a midrash, on the way we tell the story of Jesus’ death. Some see the line as bold and solid, that when he wrote of one who suffers for Israel, Isaiah was foretelling the holy life, vicarious death, and redeeming resurrection of Christ Jesus. Some see the line more as a looser kind of lasso that draws in useful images from a set of beautiful poems in Isaiah and elsewhere (see Daniel 12) about what we’ve come to call the Suffering Servant. The Suffering Servant is said to undergo innocent pain and even death and then be glorified for the sake of God’s people. This is a vision that gives hope in exile and reassurance of a new day ahead.

Since Bernhard Duhm first proposed in the late 19th century that Isaiah 52–53 is one of four poems by an author writing at the end of Israel’s Babylonian exile, the suffering of this figure has been the aspect that has caught the most attention. Here Christians have found a messianic vision to claim: of an innocent one whose suffering would bring forgiveness, salvation, and new glory. This has been a powerful lens through which to see the Passion of Jesus, capturing meaning in the story of unjust crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection. This roots the story in history and evokes a depth of feeling that gives ballast as we tell of God’s saving grace in the death of Jesus. Our appreciation only widens as we learn ways faithful Jews have read this poem differently over the centuries. We have inherited a quiver of moving images here. (For a helpful review of interpretations of this passage, see Marc Brettler and Amy-Jill Levine’s article in the April 2019 issue of *Interpretation*.)

Yet there’s one image in that quiver that we might pass over too quickly. It offers a vision that helps us see Christ’s suffering through the prophetic window of his

ministry and not just his Passion—teaching us a new economy, where poor shall be rich; a new politics, where last shall be first; a new aesthetic, where what the world sees as ugly will be cherished as divine; a new pedagogy, where wisdom will be afforded to the young; and a new rhetoric, where those with power will be surprised by truths without eloquence coming from sources without authority.

We are told that the Suffering Servant doesn't attract with beauty but startles and astonishes us nonetheless. He speaks what has not been heard, hushes those who think that only they have the right to speak, and brings speech to what has been silenced. He is hidden from view, as if he is just one among many who have grown up among us. He's neither strong nor successful by standards that bring fame in the world. In fact, he knew infirmity and disdain. We passed by him on the street, swiped left when he appeared on-screen, and changed the station when he began to speak. And yet he was still the One of God. He experienced what we experience, with intensity and healing love—to redeem our lives, reveal God, and give hope.

Jesus suffered as this Suffering Servant suffered. But as we read the story in John, Jesus does not seem quite so obscure. He wasn't hidden. He had a following, got attention from authorities, prompted public passion, was tried, executed, and buried in the fresh tomb of a nobleman. His was a cause that wasn't out of view, even if it was doomed to failure by the measures of the world.

What do we make of the difference? What do we make of the hiddenness of Isaiah's Suffering Servant when we notice the public nature of John's Jesus? Does the analogy break down?

Maybe. But perhaps there's a truth in connecting Isaiah and John that can help us see more about the Passion story than we often do. Maybe there is a focus here that sharpens our view—even for believers who tell the story as a public drama. For maybe there is something still hidden, as if from the creation of the world, in the events of Christ's death. Maybe there is truth that is too hard to quickly see, too quiet to clearly hear, too surprising to easily accept, too simple to confidently understand, and too vulnerable for our frail vision to seem worthy of attention. For here is a story of our incarnate Creator subjected to condemnation by the very creatures who were made in the Creator's image. And so here, perhaps, is a trace of eternal love shining through all of the lines we draw to obscure it.

Here Christ’s Passion can be gently linked to his birth in a humble room, to a woman who is, like the suffering figure in Isaiah, called God’s servant—an intimate and vulnerable follower of the very one she mothers. And here Christ’s Passion can also be linked to Jesus healing folks who were rejected in their pain, forgiving those who were judged by the world, calling together people who would never have met if left to the world’s politics, and trusting the untrustworthy.

Consider the hiddenness of Isaiah’s Suffering Servant. What might it tell us about how the suffering of Christ can wind its way into the texture of all Creation with the healing love he bears?