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Lent Rotation 2023 – The Suffering Servant

Isaiah 52:13-15 – A Wise Servant – A Servant for All Nations

Lutherans have long called this question *the crux of theology*: why are some saved and not others, especially when so many have the same opportunity to hear and believe God’s Word as anyone else? That question leads into discussions about God’s sovereignty, about human freewill, about God’s love and justice and the clarity of God’s Word. The wisest philosophers and theologians have debated this question for centuries, and every different Christian denomination has their own answer to it.

But if all the world’s wisdom hasn’t been able to solve *that* problem, then how about this even more basic one: why is anyone saved at all? While ancient philosophers preached excellence and duty and modern philosophers promote personal choice and civic righteousness, the Bible says, “*the soul who sins is the one who will die.*” No amount of worldly wisdom can explain away the bare truth that because of our sins, we deserve God’s condemnation. Period.

Even the best scholars and philosophers were no match for that problem, so instead God sent a *servant*. “*My servant will act wisely,*” he says – where worldly wisdom couldn’t cut it, this servant would have the divine wisdom to know *what* needed to be done and to know *how* to accomplish it for the salvation of humanity. His end goal was that “*he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted,*” that is, he will be raised from the dead, lifted up to heaven, and exalted at the right hand of God. That’s an amazing, victorious picture! But how does he get there, and how does he take us with him?

That’s where this comes in. Psalm 51 says, “*Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.*” Hyssop was a shrub with stalks and leaves and flowers that could be bunched up kind of like this, not very strong or substantial, but it actually played an important role in Bible history. It was used first to paint blood on the doorframes of the Israelite houses before the Lord’s Passover in Egypt. It was used to sprinkle blood or water in various cleansing rituals at the temple. It was even used as a tool to lift up a wet sponge to Jesus’s lips while he hung on the cross. Hyssop became synonymous with sacrifice, because sacrifice so often meant shedding an animal’s blood and sprinkling it on the people in token of *that* blood being the price that paid for *their* sins.

So where does God’s servant come in? Well, before his resurrection, ascension, and exaltation came his humiliation, persecution, and crucifixion. He had to *become* the sacrifice – and not a clean and dignified one, either. One beaten and bruised and disfigured and marred, a piece of meat so shredded and pulverized that it could hardly be recognized as human anymore. That’s what Roman crucifixion did to a person. He was first *scourged* – whipped with bits of bone or metal tied on laces, designed to rip the flesh. He was beaten about the head, neck, and face with fists and clubs. The Roman soldiers pressed a crown of thorns into his scalp and temples. Then after all that, he was forced to carry his own crossbeam to Golgotha, maybe a hundred pounds or more, so that he could be nailed through the wrists and feet and hung up in nakedness and shame to die in agony, out near the public roads so that all who passed by could see and scoff. Who could help but be appalled at what he went through? The Romans had no qualms about cruel and unusual punishment; in fact, that was their specialty.

But this bloodshed wasn’t like those animal sacrifices in the temple, because “Not all the blood of beasts on Israel’s altar slain could give the guilty conscience peace or wash away the stain.” No, the blood shed by God’s Servant and our Savior, Jesus Christ, sprinkled *many nations*, everybody, with the perfect sacrifice to pay for our sins once for all and forever. Only, we don’t use hyssop to sprinkle the blood of that sacrifice anymore, because those temple sacrifices didn’t last any longer than these dead branches. Rather, Christians dating all the way back to the Apostle James have often done their sprinkling with a scallop shell like this one as a symbol of holy baptism (notice especially the golden cross, where baptism gets its power to forgive and save). Well, James would use a shell as a simple tool to scoop and pour water over someone’s head, but that reminds us of something even more and better. Inside a scallop shell you could find a well-protected pearl. As valuable as that pearl is, so much more valuable are the blessings that holy baptism brings to us because of Jesus’ sacrifice for us! Our sins are washed away, our hearts are cleansed whiter than snow! And not only that, but just like that pearl was well-protected inside that hard shell, baptism provides our souls a shell of protection now under God’s special love and care until he finally delivers us home to himself in heaven one day.

No, not all the world’s scholars and philosophers with all their wisdom could come up with a plan that worked, like that one. Even the world’s greatest kings and advisors can’t offer so much as a word to *improve* it or to *disprove* it. The God of all the universe doesn’t demand us to sacrifice ourselves for him like we’d expect; he sacrifices himself for us. And the benefits of that sacrifice – forgiveness, new life, and eternal salvation – come to us not with trumpets blaring and ticker-tape parades, as deserved as all that would be; they come to us through simple water, drawn and poured in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. So hearing and beholding our God’s love and our Savior’s wisdom for our salvation greater than this world could ever possibly produce or rival – how could we do any other than shut our mouths, too? How could we think about doubting God or his Word? How could we think about questioning God’s love or justice in our lives? How could we act like we know better than what God’s Word clearly teaches, or like God is out of line for not keeping up with what’s acceptable to society, or like we have better things to do than to be here in God’s house surrounded by his life-giving means of grace?

No, before God’s Suffering Servant the mouths of our old sinful selves must be shut, so that we can open our mouths anew in faith with the praise that he deserves for showing us the full extent of his love for us. What our worldly wisdom could never accomplish, God’s Servant did when Jesus Christ sprinkled your head with baptismal water and your heart with his sacrificial blood. What the wisest among us could never possibly grasp, our Savior-God freely gave when he made you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. And maybe that’s why the *crux of theology* is such an appropriate term for that philosophical question that has stumped our best and brightest for centuries. That word *crux* means *cross*, and that’s where all of God’s wisdom can be found: in Christ crucified. So why are some saved and not others? Why is anyone saved at all? Let the philosophers philosophize, because you know the only answer that matters: God’s perfect Suffering Servant, Jesus Christ, humbled and exalted, crucified and resurrected, out of his pure goodness and love for you, so that your hearts could be sprinkled and your souls could be saved now and forever. Amen.