

*unused, Isaiah 53

“Body piercing saved my life.”

I was given a T-shirt in youth group as a sophomore in high school that said that on the front.

It's supposed to catch somebody's attention although it might have been somewhat less of a head scratcher then, when I at least had my ear pierced.

That slogan was on the front and on the back came the explanation: Isaiah 53:5, the NIV translation: ‘But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities ... and by his wounds we are healed.’

I wasn't certain I believed it. I wanted to believe it and hoped my skeptical attempts at belief were thus sufficient to get me a merciful nod from St. Peter at the pearly gates. But either way, I got a shirt, ^{and} it seemed kind of clever and edgy and identified me with this youth group full of largely outcast kinda kids from my high school.

In case you're a cradle Lutheran and perhaps aren't familiar, I suppose that's how kids raised ^{as} ~~in~~ ^{might} agnostic homes “rebel,” at least in some cases. And yes, *Reader's Digest* cartoons featuring a winged St. Peter as a sort of angelic bouncer at Club Cloud is what stood in for a shockingly sizable portion of my theological education to that point in my life.

But regardless of however oddly it happened, it meant this was probably the first Bible verse I ever memorized, though admittedly in ^{an abbreviated} its shortened form, to fit appropriately on the back of the shirt under an image of a nail and crown of thorns. ^{And} Besides John 3:16, ^{just because} as it appeared on a wooden sign tacked to a tree on private property along the county road to my friend's house that our school bus passed by each day.

Now I wore that T-shirt fairly regularly that year, though I don't know what I would have done if somebody would have questioned me about it, what it meant, whether I believed it. No one ever did. Perhaps ironically, because I didn't know the verse that comes two lines later, I may very well have remained silent, unable, or more accurately, unwilling, to open my mouth. I'd certainly have been afraid.

Now, the Suffering Servant described here by the prophet Isaiah, keeps silent, not out of fear, but rather courageously. Their tormenter does not have the satisfaction of hearing them plead for mercy, as they must certainly have hoped.

An Old Testament scholar and professor, Amy Erickson, shares on this passage that she will often "get huffy" with her grad students when they leap to answer every problem of the Hebrew Bible with the tried-and-true go-to answer from all the way back in Sunday School: "Jesus!" But in this poetic form, she admits, it is indeed the right answer, and Isaiah's poetry paints for us a deep and powerful picture of Christ's pain, his mission to this world and his character.

She teaches that in the prophet's lifetime, during the exile in Babylon, the figure of the Suffering Servant, would likely have been heard to be ^{na stand-in} carrying the suffering of the Hebrew people there, giving them encouragement that "it gets better," and lending them hope amidst generation after generation of brokenness and abandonment.

^{Other prophecies of a coming Messiah}
~~Or it would have~~ ^{had been} endorsed for the exiled Israelites a king unlike any they had known previously ... in this case a foreigner, commanding an empire ^{much} more generous to their conquered nation than the Babylonians: in this case the Persian emperor Cyrus, who freed them and permitted them to return to their homeland, to some extent fulfilling for them the definition of

that mythical creature known as the “benevolent dictator.” But he was also killed in battle, thus ending his reign and giving the humbling experience of going from one on the throne to a wounded and finally defeated warrior.

Dr. Steed Davidson, my own professor of Old Testament, posed to our class this question of who Isaiah’s ^{propheisized Messiah} Suffering Servant represented: Christ as Christians believe or Cyrus as the ancient Hebrews likely believed? In classic Lutheran fashion, I would argue: “both/and.” I don’t feel ^{it necessary} the need to diminish Jewish belief to have my own, but ^{I think we can} rather see a beautiful pattern of God’s deliverance of those whom God has loved, drawing new life and new beginnings from amidst the most cruel and tragic of circumstances, up to and including the suffering of the innocent. Of God anointing an unlikely king in more ways than one and achieving victory over and against death.

Another Hebrew Bible scholar Jeremy Schipper points out how thoroughly Isaiah uses language which describes God’s Suffering Servant as one who would be physically scarred and thus a total outcast from ancient society: stricken, afflicted, even “struck down by God.” This is how people saw the lepers, the disabled of all sorts ... and yet if we see those on the margins of society **today**, what if we were to look at **them** through God’s eyes? Should we not see Christ?

Now, there was a news brief from South Carolina ^{a few years back,} that made it to the national level this week and was easy to have missed ... a man who was a regular at a truck stop diner in a little town of about 5,000 residents was asked to leave by an employee because they said he was scaring off customers. See the customer, Kirby Evans, doesn’t have a left eye or a nose. He lost them both a few years ^{earlier} ago to cancer.

The portrait of Mr. Evans that ran with the story in some news outlets would certainly startle a lot of people. He had indeed been **stricken** ... by a disease that is among the most frightening to us today. And yet he told reporters even though he had been hurt deeply by the actions of the restaurant employee, he was amazed by how his community rallied around him in the aftermath of that incident.

“I didn't know there were that many people that cared but there are,” he said. “They're out there everywhere.”

How can we be “those people” out there in the world we live in? How can **our** community be that community ... that speaks up for the downtrodden, who identify with the ones who have suffered and can gather up the courage to stand up and say “enough!”

Twenty ²² years ¹ ago, I don't know if I could have spoken up to give a defense of my uncertain faith and hoped the T-shirt I was wearing could have delivered some kind of positive message on my behalf. Now I understand that the gifts I have been given by God include --not just my salvation by Christ's suffering -- but a voice. We are all given a voice with which to speak out against perversions of justice. It's not our selves, or our faith, or even Christ that need defending ... I think Jesus is quite capable of that himself. But he calls us to come alongside our neighbors who need us most, with whom **he** identified so strongly ... forgiven for all those times we failed to do what was right and given yet another chance. For that opportunity in this fallen world, let us give our thanks and praise. Amen.