

LENT WEEK 4

March 22, 2020

READING

Who has believed our message
and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
and like a root out of dry ground.
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.
Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.
He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
Yet who of his generation protested?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was punished.
He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,
though he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth.
Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin,
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,

and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.
After he has suffered,
he will see the light of life and be satisfied;
by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many,
and he will bear their iniquities.
Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,
because he poured out his life unto death,
and was numbered with the transgressors.
For he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.

REFLECTION

Someone recently sent me a snippet of Kate Bowler talking about how Lent is for the losing team. She paints a picture of people journeying towards the cross and the horrible death of the so called saviour; that this is a journey full of sad and weary people. I chuckled at first until I realized how profound her words were. Yes, this is a journey of the weary hearted longing for more from this life. I think that sums up a vast majority of people treading the earth, if we're honest. But what makes us losers in particular, is what we've put our hope in; or more accurately, who we've put our hope in.

After the fall, God sets into motion a new plan. At face value, it's much like a business transaction. In order to enter into the presence of a holy, sinless God, we ourselves must be holy. Set in the historical context of antiquity, the mechanism for doing this was very clearly and specifically laid out - shedding of blood of a sacrificial animal in our stead. But not just once; there had to be a regular acknowledgment of sin and physical sacrifice made for that sin. For our modern sensibilities, this may seem pedantic and a bit outlandish. It is good to be reminded though, that the purpose for all this was a reflection of the original design; and the original design was mind boggling in comparison to all the other deities of the day - a God who created us to interact with him on a personal level because of his great love for us and who delights in our very existence.

Add to that the very muddy layers of Israel's history and relationship with this God who wants to be with his people. During their time in the desert, God dwells with them as a cloud during the day and a fire overhead during the night. However, the novelty of this wore off so God decided that he would dwell in an elaborate structure as a way of appeasing his people. This was great until it wasn't great. The Israelites then wanted a human representative, someone they could talk to and physically interact with; hence the time of judges. When that became tiresome, they decided what they really needed was a king. The king model worked as long as they walked in a path of obedience. However, this too ended in failure, leading to the ultimate destruction of the nation of Israel. Behind it all remained a promise...restoration through a Saviour; a sacrifice to end all sacrifices.

I can understand why the Jewish people thought their Messiah would be someone who was to re-establish them as a nation. David's legacy was deeply intertwined into their identity. Long forgotten was God's original plan; Eden was overgrown, the weeds having choked out any sign that paradise had once existed here on earth. Yet here he was: Like one from whom people hide their faces, he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. A loser.

There are a number of verses throughout the Old Testament that directly prophesy Christ's coming and a great many more that paint an incredible picture of the restoration of God's people because of his great love for us. But these are some of my favourite because of how blunt they are. He will not be who you think he should be or who you think you need. He is not David re-incarnated. He is coming to die, to be sacrificed, not to mount an army, wage war, and claim victory on the battlefield. Oh, he will claim victory. But not in the way that we, modern day human beings or those living within Biblical times, understand victory. The greatest will become the least, the first shall become last, and the meek will inherit the earth. How backwards and astounding is that! How ever can victory be achieved with that strategy?

I agree with Kate Bowler. Lent is for losers; for all of us who put our faith in the most unlikely of Saviours. Our hope is in the least of these, the despised one, the one who doesn't even say a word in his own defence, the one who is led to his own death like one of the dumbest of all domesticated animals. Do we even grasp who it is that we are believing in to save us? This kind of saviour isn't going to make our lives easier. Rarely will we get ahead in this world with him as our lead. He will do nothing for our personal comfort; in fact the opposite might just happen. So why? Why bother? Because after all the suffering, or maybe through it, or maybe even in it, we will find the true fullness of life, glimmers of what it was meant to be. At the core of our being, we will recognize that through this unlikely Saviour is our only way home.

REMINDER

There will be many occasions this week where we want to be heard. We want to state our case, be acknowledged for our principled approach, and lead with confidence. Unfortunately friends, none of this really matters in the end. While God created us with drive, with minds to learn, curiosity, and opened doors of opportunity, these are sidebars to the real story. You are innately worthwhile, perhaps even in spite of your achievements. One day, all those things will fade away. And you will be faced with the question: did any of what I did really matter? If you clung to God, acknowledging that your life is not your own, it is fully his for his purposes, for his glory, and submitted yourself as a broken vessel to be used by him in any and all situations...I promise you, you will have mattered, no matter how you might compare yourself with the world at large. This is an upside down Gospel, meant for the least of these, the ones of us who are desperate and broken...the losers.

PRAYER

God, you have never swayed from your original intentions for us. Help us to recognize your constant and endless pursuit of us, your children. You care not about what the world would have us believe matters. You are interested in who we are, at our very core, and bringing that into your light. Help us to let go of who we think we need to be and who we want you to be. Help us to simply cling to you in any and all situations for you are good...you are good.