

“To Sustain the Weary”
March 28, 2021, Palm Sunday
Scripture: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Mark 11:1-11

It feels like I spend a lot of time looking backward whenever we have a passage from one of the prophets. But I really think it's important to know why the prophets are saying the things they do, to have a feel for their context. The book of Isaiah is the longest prophetic book and it was deeply revered by people who lived around the time of Jesus. In fact, the longest scroll that's been found among the Dead Sea collection is Isaiah. If you go to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, to the wing for the Dead Sea Scrolls, you'll see a facsimile mounted on the wall stretching several feet. It's the only complete book among the scrolls. Isaiah was also very influential for the early Christians. They saw in the prophet's words references to Jesus' life and ministry, and to his death.

Isaiah was written over a long period of time, probably by several people. If there was an original prophet named Isaiah he probably lived in the 8th century BC but his following continued into the 6th and 5th centuries. There may have been a sort of Order of Isaiah, a community that studied his words closely and added to them as the circumstances required. So, at the beginning of Isaiah we hear about the Israelite world in the 8th century when the northern kingdom was being threatened, and toward the end of it we hear from the 5th century world, after the return from exile in Babylon. But in the part we're looking at it's the 6th century while the people are still living in exile.

The questions the people are struggling with are predictable: How could God have allowed this to happen to them? Did God abandon them, sell them out to Babylon? Or was God too weak to protect them? Of course they assume their troubles are God's fault. So, as this chapter opens, in the first three verses, we hear from God. God asks them, “If you think I've abandoned you, prove it!” God asks if they have the bill of divorce used to send their mother, Israel, away, or do they know where the creditor is to whom God sold them. God answers: “No, because of your sins you were sold, and for your transgressions your mother was put away.” In other words, their own behavior led to their downfall.

That's not an especially surprising insight. Over and over the people of Israel have to learn how far they fall short of God's expectations. And what happens to them isn't a punishment, really; it's the natural consequences of their behavior, their inability to live with compassion and love their neighbors, to treat the poor with dignity and do justice. What is surprising is God's response to them, in spite of their failures.

God sees their condition and knows how miserably they fail time and time again, yet God refuses to walk away from them. God will not allow them simply to be destroyed. And God will not force them to behave. Instead they're given a teacher, someone to sustain them in their

weariness, to show them the meaning of compassion. So, their redemption isn't the result of coercion; it comes through persuasion.

All through the Bible we find God facing off against a world that is obsessed with violence and force to offer an alternative. Whenever the people are in trouble from the outside or things are going badly within, they resort to violence and coercion to win or keep their salvation. It comes in the form of battles with neighboring groups as they enter the Promised Land and civil war to overthrow one king or another, and it always ends in disaster. Even when things in the country start to go well, it isn't long before they begin neglecting the poor and favoring the powerful.

God speaks through the prophets, over and over, warning the nation to change their ways before it all falls apart. By giving them Torah, the way of compassion, God intends to lead Israel into a new reality. God's desire is for Israel to become a beacon for the world, where coercion and violence no longer have the upper hand, making the weak subject to the powerful. By giving Israel a teacher to sustain the weary, God is training Israel itself to become the world's teacher.

Teaching through example to train the people into a new understanding is used over and over in the Bible. That's what Jesus is doing when he takes his place on the donkey that day entering Jerusalem. He's demonstrating another way to resist the violence of Rome. He's rejecting the lure to meet force with force and walking the path of humility. Jesus will not resort to coercion but insists on sustaining the weary with a word. And he invites us to walk the same path.

The way of our salvation doesn't end with Jesus, it begins with him. And it's for us to walk the path he shows us. Jesus embodies the compassion and love of God and invites us to walk that path with him. When he sits on that donkey and all the people throw their coats on the ground before him, imagine them throwing their lives in his path. That's what we're called to do, to throw ourselves before him and allow him to change us, to be filled with the same love and compassion that fills him.

But, we can't forget, this is also the way of the cross. The love Jesus offers, the world will always resist. The figure in Isaiah, the teacher who comes to sustain the weary, is met with spitting and beating. Not from some faceless enemy but from the very people he's meant to teach. There are those who want to respond to exile with hatred and destruction, and any suggestion otherwise has to be silenced. When we stand for compassion over cruelty, for justice over tyranny, the world will reject us. But we cannot allow that rejection to define us or to turn us away from the path Jesus walks. He walks the way of compassion and because he does, to show us the true depth of God's love, he walks the path to the cross. All of it to sustain the weary and bring healing to us all.

That's what this journey is all about. These forty days of Lent have been to train us, once more, in the way of love and compassion. This season is a microcosm of our whole life's

journey. Through it we learn to let go of hatred and violence and fear and take on the life of Christ, to walk the way of compassion, justice and peace. We do that knowing what the cost will be yet willing to pay it for the sake of salvation. Jesus shows us the way and calls us to follow him. So, even though today the season of Lent comes to an end, our journey with Christ is just beginning. Throw your lives before him and let his love and compassion shape you and make you a new creation, a teacher to sustain the weary in a world longing to be healed.

Amen