

More's the pity

Isaiah 53:4-5

March 15, 2015



The image on the cover of your bulletin shows a white policeman holding a club standing over the slumped body of an African-American. It is hard to judge from the photo if the limp, presumably beaten, body is that of a man or a woman, but I think it is a woman.

It's an image from Bloody Sunday, as it has become known, the Sunday fifty years ago -- March 7, 1965 -- when 500-600 marchers, mostly African-American, set out from Selma, Alabama, to walk the fifty-four miles to the state capitol in Montgomery to dramatize their appeal that they be accorded their proper constitutional rights, including the right to vote. When they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge into Dallas County, they were met by a battalion of Alabama state troopers and county deputies, most of whom had responded that day to an order from the county sheriff demanding that all white males over the age of twenty-one report for duty.

Because they needed every hand on deck. Because they needed every white hand on deck to counter this grave threat, the grave threat posed by peaceful marchers simply asking that the rights that were already theirs by law be protected. They had to do their duty. They had to put an end to this nonsense. They had to beat down -- literally beat down -- this threat.

And they did. Once the marchers crossed the bridge, they were ordered to disband and before any discussion could take place, the enforcers moved in. Almost seventy marchers were injured, some beaten into unconsciousness, both men and women.

It was March 7, 1965. I was a little more than a month short of my twelfth birthday. What was I doing?

That day, that image, is emblematic of the much broader, much longer, prolonged suffering of a people. African-Americans, as a people, have suffered in this land generation after generation.

They are African-Americans, because this is not the land of their ancestors, as it is not the land of most of our ancestors. But their ancestors were brought here involuntarily, torn from their homelands, forced into slavery, bought and sold, used and abused, treated not as human beings, but as commodities.

They became African-Americans, citizens, like any of us, of our adopted homeland. Slaves were set free, but they enjoyed few of the fruits of freedom. They were guaranteed rights, but many of those rights were denied anyway. Disparaging attitudes and prejudicial regulations, intimidation and overt violence have all been used to keep African-Americans down, to deny them, as a people, any real semblance of equality. That has been the story of this people from the time they were first brought to this land, and it was their story fifty years ago, in my lifetime and in the lifetime of many of us, and, all too often, it is still their story.

*Because of our sins he was wounded,
beaten because of the evil we did ...*

I have paired the image on the bulletin cover with these lines from Isaiah. Is that fair? Or was she beaten because of the evil she did?

Of course, it's fair! The words with which the prophet describes the experience of the people of Israel some twenty-five hundred years ago very much fit the experience of the African-American people in this land over the last several hundred years. Listen!

*He grew like a plant taking root in dry ground ...
We despised him and rejected him ...
He endured suffering and pain ...*

Yes?

We ignored him as if he were nothing ...

Which may be the cruelest cut of all. I learned this week from an article in *The Atlantic* about drapetomania, a mental disease identified in 1851 by the “distinguished New Orleans physician” Samuel Cartwright, a disease which, left untreated, he says “caus[es] Negroes to run away.” Like other diseases this “good” doctor treated, this one too had its proper regimen for prevention and cure:

If treated kindly, well fed and clothed, with fuel enough to keep a small fire burning all night -- separated into families, each family having its own house -- not permitted to run about at night to visit their neighbors, to receive visits or use intoxicating liquors, and not overworked or exposed too much to the weather, they are very easily governed -- more so than any other people in the world. If any one or more of them, at any time, are inclined to raise their heads to a level with their master or overseer, humanity and their own good requires that they should be punished until they fall into that submissive state which was intended for them to occupy. They have only to be kept in that state, and treated like children to prevent and cure them from running away.

Sure, that was a hundred and fifty years ago, but while I was at Yale, forty years ago, eleven of my classmates were suspended for protesting and disrupting a lecture to be given by Nobel Prize-winning physicist, William Shockley, who argued that “IQ tests show that whites are genetically more intelligent than blacks, and that intelligence can be measured by the percentage of Caucasian blood in an individual.”

We despised him and rejected him and ignored him as if he were nothing. And “all the while, we thought that his suffering was punishment sent by God.” Somehow, he deserves it -- because he is genetically inferior, because God has cursed black-skinned people, because they don’t know their place -- all of which are reasons which have been given, and continue to be given, for the suffering of the African-American people.

But we know -- we know! -- that this suffering comes from a different source.

*Because of our sins he was wounded,
beaten because of the evil we did ...*

*We are healed by the punishment he suffered,
made whole by the blows he received ...*

These last lines are breathtaking. How can it be? How can his suffering benefit me? How can his injuries make me whole?

This idea, the idea of redemptive suffering, suffering that accomplishes God's purpose, is hard, very hard for us to grasp, but it is the heart of the meaning of Isaiah's poetry. But we have to tread very carefully here, because this idea all too easily can appear highly offensive. Look again at the image. Do I mean to say that her suffering is not needless, that it serves a purpose ... for me? That her suffering helps ... us? That her suffering matters ... to us? That her suffering matters?

Of course, it matters! It did matter. Her suffering and the shared suffering of people like her raised the consciousness of a nation and changed its course. Her suffering helped precipitate the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and other civil rights initiatives to follow.

But the key to Isaiah's insight is this: her suffering does not merely lay the groundwork for the gains of her own people; her suffering heals the wounds of the people who beat her. It exposes, indicts, subsumes, and finally overcomes our sin, the evil that is in us. When she is set free, we too are set free. When she is acknowledged as fully human, we finally become fully human.

She was beaten because of the evil we did, but her suffering, by the grace and power and will of God, became the means of most needful healing, not just for the wounds of her own people, but for the wounds of all of us, black and white alike.

Much of what I have said may seem a like history lesson, and it is. But what does this have to do with us, with the spiritual needs and purposes that bring us here into this sanctuary today? Simply this: spirituality is a history lesson! It is a tracing of the ways and purposes God intends for the people made in his image that have remained constant from the beginning of our creation till now.

Jesus knew this history and, in obedience to the will of God, he claimed this history and made it his own. He was despised and rejected. He endured suffering and pain. Because of our sins he was wounded. He was beaten because of the evil we did. And his suffering is redemptive. We are healed by the punishment he suffered. We are made whole by the blows he received.

And we are called now, as Jesus' people, to follow.

When we see suffering, how do we typically respond? With horror. With dismay. With relief, that it is not us. With resignation, that there always will be people that suffer in this world. With pity.

With pity. But what does pity do? Pity puts distance between me and the one who suffers. I pity him. I feel badly for him. But it is he who suffers.

*But he endured the suffering that should have been ours,
the pain that we should have borne.*

More's the pity! There is more I should pity: not him, but me! Because I am doubly damned. I should be the one suffering, and another is suffering for me.

What does Jesus do? More than pity. Jesus closes the distance. He goes to where the suffering is, and takes it on himself.

How then do we follow? We close the distance. We go to where the suffering is, and we take it on ourselves. As long as it is their suffering and theirs alone, neither they nor we will be healed.