

My servant

Isaiah 52:13

February 22, 2015

I am angry, and I am frightened.

I am frightened by ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. You know about the horrible scene on the beach in Libya, where members of ISIS beheaded twenty-one Egyptian Christians. It is appalling, revolting, unbearable, unwatchable. I refuse to watch the video and I quickly swipe past every time a story or photo of the event comes up on the news apps on my phone. It is simply too disturbing to me. I don't want to think about it or even know about it. This is the first time -- right here, right now -- that I have spoken about this to anyone.

It is disturbing because of the manner of the killing itself. It horrifies me. It is a terrible way to die. It is meant to horrify. It is meant to terrify. The numbers of people killed by ISIS is not all that large, but the terror engendered by their killings is all out of proportion to the threat.

It is highly unlikely that either you or I will ever come in contact with an ISIS militant, yet we feel vulnerable, we are afraid, because it is so arbitrary. People are killed simply because they are Christians, because they are Yezidis, because they are Shia, because they are Jews, simply because they are not ISIS. It could be anybody.

And, it seems, it could be anywhere. It was Syria. It was Iraq. But now it is Libya, and they talk of Rome next, Europe next. And it seems possible. Their ambitions are enormous. They seek to bring the world to its knees, but, in the face of their mania and in the face of our fear, it seems possible.

And it is frightening because there are people eager to join this cadre of murderous zealots. Just this Friday, three British girls -- three fifteen and sixteen year-old girls! -- hopped a plane to Turkey intending to enter Syria in order to join up with ISIS. Why? Why? What could possibly be attractive about this horror? Clearly ISIS has touched a nerve, something deep, something elemental, something visceral, both in them and in us.

I am frightened, and I am angry. I am angry at so much of what is being said in response to the ISIS atrocities by people claiming to speak in the name of Jesus, in the name of my Lord Jesus! They are calling for action. They are calling for war. They are asking Christians -- Christians! -- to rise up and urge their leaders to do whatever it takes to wipe out this threat, and if their leaders balk, to take up arms themselves.

This week, a popular television commentator called on American clergy -- Christian pastors, Jewish rabbis and Muslim imams -- to address their congregations:

The civilized world needs to come together to eliminate the threat from the Earth. And if the politicians won't do it, the clergy must lead the way ... I ask all religious leaders ... to address their congregations this weekend. Once the American people rise up, President Obama will be forced to take the holy war seriously.

They are calling for action. They are calling for war. They are calling for holy war. But don't you see? That is exactly what ISIS wants! A holy war! But is there such a thing? Can a war, can any war, be holy?

There is great debate right now between the Obama administration and its critics from the religious and political right about what to call this fight and about what to call its combatants. Are members of ISIS terrorist extremists or Islamic radicals? Are we fighting against violent insurgents or religious zealots? Is this a war between competing political aims or competing religions? Is it war or is it holy war?

It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. It doesn't make any difference what we call it. What is abundantly clear -- what is abundantly clear, at least to me -- is what we must do, what you and I as followers of Jesus must do.

Our response, our way, our task is clear. If we call ourselves Christians, followers of Jesus Christ, doesn't it make sense that we would do what Jesus would do? And what would Jesus do? Lead a holy war? Really? That's why I am so angry. People are defaming the name of Jesus, using his name to further their own cause, not his. And that is blasphemy!

As followers of Jesus, our response, our way, our task is clear. And it will be made clear, abundantly clear, as we listen during these seven weeks of Lent to the words of the prophet Isaiah. We begin here:

My servant will succeed in his task.

My servant will succeed in his task. That is good news, comforting news, hopeful news, but hearing it raises two questions. Who is "my servant?" And what is the task?

The book of Genesis recounts the story of a visit to Isaac one night by the Lord who tells him:

I am the God of your father Abraham. Do not be afraid; I am with you. I will bless you and give you many descendants because of my promise to my servant Abraham.

“My servant,” the Lord’s servant, is Abraham! It is clear! And what is Abraham’s task? To be the bearer of the promise, the promise of blessing, the promise of many descendants. But the blessing and the descendants are really the instrument of fulfilling the rest of the promise. “I will bless you,” the Lord promises Abraham, “so that you will be a blessing. Through you I will bless all the nations.”

This is Abraham’s task, to bless the nations, but it is not just Abraham’s task, not just Abraham’s promise. It belongs too to Isaac and to Jacob and to all the descendants of Abraham. It belongs to Israel. “My servant” is Israel, the people of Israel. Isaiah makes that identification explicit:

*... you, Israel my servant,
you are the people that I have chosen,
the descendants of Abraham, my friend.*

“My servant” is Israel and Israel’s task is the same: to receive God’s blessing in order to be a blessing. Israel’s task to bless all the nations, to be a light to the nations, to be the means, the catalyst, the witness, by which all people are brought into community, into communion, with God and with each other. It is important to hear this, to know this, because when Isaiah says, “he endured the suffering that should have been ours, the pain we should have borne,” he is talking about Israel!

He wasn’t talking about Jesus? No, but we talk about Jesus! Because “my servant” is Jesus, too. Jesus is a child of Abraham, an inheritor of the promise. Paul will say in Galatians, the subject of our winter Bible study, that Jesus is the explicit inheritor of the promise to Abraham.

Jesus is the Lord’s servant, the chosen one, the anointed one, the messiah, assuming the task, acting for Israel, acting as Israel. Jesus is the light to the nations. It is through him that God will bless all the nations.

“My servant” is Jesus. And “my servant” is us. We are what we are, we are who we are, because we believe in Jesus, because we are in him and he is in us. We are his people. We are his body. We are Jesus in the world.

So we are the Lord's servant, inheritors of the promise and of the task that has belonged to God's people from the beginning. God blesses us so that we will be a blessing. God blesses us so that we will bless the nations. How?

*Who would have believed what we now report?
Who could have seen the Lord's hand in this?
It was the will of the Lord that his servant
grow like a plant taking root in dry ground.
He had no dignity or beauty
to make us take notice of him.
There was nothing attractive about him,
nothing that would draw us to him.
We despised him and rejected him;
he endured suffering and pain.
No one would even look at him—
we ignored him as if he were nothing.*

*But he endured the suffering that should have been ours,
the pain that we should have borne.
All the while we thought that his suffering
was punishment sent by God.
But 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.
All of us were like sheep that were lost,
each of us going his own way.
But the Lord made the punishment fall on him,
the punishment all of us deserved.*

*He was treated harshly, but endured it humbly;
he never said a word.
Like a lamb about to be slaughtered,
like a sheep about to be sheared,
he never said a word.
He was arrested and sentenced and led off to die,
and no one cared about his fate.
He was put to death for the sins of our people.
He was placed in a grave with those who are evil,
he was buried with the rich,
even though he had never committed a crime
or ever told a lie.*

*The Lord says,
 "It was my will that he should suffer;
 his death was a sacrifice to bring forgiveness.
And so he will see his descendants;
 he will live a long life,
 and through him my purpose will succeed.
After a life of suffering, he will again have joy;
 he will know that he did not suffer in vain."*

That's how. That's how Jesus blesses the nations. That's how we bless the nations. By being despised and rejected -- misunderstood. By enduring suffering and pain -- being willing to go the hard way. By healing others' hurts and forgiving others' sins. By taking the way of sacrifice, taking the way of love, taking the way of the cross. This is the way of the Lord's servant. This is Israel's way, Jesus' way, our way.

And this is God's promise: "My servant will succeed in his task." We will succeed! When we go this way, the way of the Lord's servant, Jesus' way, we will succeed!

*Goodness is stronger than evil;
 love is stronger than hate.*

Do you believe it? Are you ready to live it?