

Who could have seen the Lord's hand in this?

Isaiah 53:1-3

March 8, 2015

*We limit not the truth of God to our poor reach of mind,
to notions of our day and place, crude, partial, and confined;
No, let a new and better hope within our hearts be stirred:
O God, grant yet more light and truth to break forth from your Word.*

There, dear sisters and brothers, is expressed a key tenet of our faith: we don't know! We don't know. There is so much we don't know. And this is a crucial element of our witness as believers to the rest of the world: we don't know!

I read this week an devotional article by Frederick Buechner on "apologists." He writes:

C.S. Lewis once said something to the effect that no Christian doctrine ever looked so threadbare to him as when he had just finished successfully defending it. The reason is not hard to find.

In order to defend the faith successfully -- which is the business of apologists -- they need to reduce it to a defensible size. It is easier to hold a fortress against the enemy than to hold a landscape. They try to make each doctrine as it comes along sound as logical and plausible as they can. The trouble, of course, is that by and large logic and plausibility are not the heart of the matter, and therefore apologists are apt to end up proclaiming a faith that may be quite persuasive on paper, but is difficult to imagine either them or anyone else getting very excited about.

We don't know. There is so much we don't know. But that is the glory of our faith, not its flaw: that who God is and what God does is so much more than anything we could ever have imagined or predicted or made up, so much more than anything we can even explain. How excited would you be about serving a God you could explain?

This is a crucial element of our witness. When we speak with great certainty, with great precision, with utmost confidence, may I say, with utmost arrogance, claiming to know exactly who God is and who God is not, exactly what God likes and what God doesn't like, exactly who is in and who is out, whose purposes are we serving?

Who knows the mind of God? But when we claim we do, are we making God bigger or smaller? More compelling or less? Are we offering the world a glimpse of a God whose thoughts are not like our thoughts and whose ways are not like our ways, a God always beyond the reach of our imagination, or are we presenting the finished portrait of a God made ... in our own image?

We don't know. There is so much we don't know.

*Who would have believed what we now report?
Who could have seen the Lord's hand in this?*

We didn't see it coming. It's not what we expected. We didn't know.

It was the will of the Lord that his servant grow like a plant taking root in dry ground.

Like a plant taking root in dry ground. Weak, pale, unsightly, vulnerable. Living a tenuous, uncertain existence, balanced precariously on the cusp between life and death. Dependent, utterly dependent, on the rains, on that gift of life, that may or may not come.

Unattractive, with no special dignity or beauty. Nondescript, undistinguished, easily overlooked. Not a "player," not a rock star, not on Oprah. No book contracts or TV shows or megachurch followers. Not in the headlines, not in the limelight, not a household name.

But despised and rejected. Despised and rejected, as I read the context, not so much out of malice as neglect. He is simply insignificant, off our radar. Even when we do notice him, we don't notice him. We dismiss him. We discount him. We pass him by ... just as we pass by so many of them, those who don't matter to us, those who don't matter, those we sneer at, those we despise.

Enduring suffering and pain. Again not necessarily because we inflict it. Just one of those -- not us thankfully! -- who ends up on the bottom, suffering one injury after another, one indignity after another, one pain after another, one loss after another. We see his suffering -- when we notice him at all -- but we turn away, we move on, we ignore him as if he were nothing, because, to us, he is nothing ... just like so many others we pass by and ignore.

Unattractive, unnoticed, disregarded, suffering, ignored. Like a plant taking root in dry ground. Who is this? This is a portrait of whom?

It is a portrait of the Lord's servant, of the one chosen by God to make God known. It is a portrait of Israel, broken and humiliated Israel, despised and rejected, suffering and ignored, not a player on the world stage, not a force to be reckoned with, not a people worth bothering with, if anything, a people only to be pitied.

Why this one? Why these ones? Why this way?

Maybe that's the wrong question, because it assumes there's a way that makes more sense, because it assumes God could have done better.

Who could have seen the Lord's hand in this? The Lord's hand is in this. In this! So the question is: if God is in this, if this is the way God chooses, if these are the ones God chooses to make God known to the world, what does that tell us about God? What does that tell us about God's way?

And what does that tell us about where the Lord's servants will be found today?