

## Wretched

Isaiah 52:13 - 53:6  
December 17, 2006

*Wretched.*

What an evocative word! Even if you were unfamiliar with the word, you could guess its meaning just from the sound of the word itself. *Wretched.*

It's a word of many meanings: related meanings, overlapping meanings, but distinct meanings. *Wretched* may mean poor -- literally, materially poor. *Wretched* may refer to a state of mind -- miserable, depressed, distraught, grief-stricken. *Wretched* may refer to a person's circumstances -- pitiful, suffering, unfortunate, oppressed. *Wretched* may refer to a person's moral condition -- bad, shameful, despicable. *Wretched* is a word that vividly describes a variety of human conditions, all of which are rather unpleasant!

So when I announced to the church staff last Tuesday that my sermon title for the next Sunday would be *Wretched* they all said, "What? What kind of title is that to use during the Christmas season?" It's a season of joy and promise and beauty, a season for sharing love and renewing hope. What does *wretched* have to do with that? What does *wretched* have to do with the Christmas spirit? What does *wretched* have to do with the Christmas story?

Actually, quite a lot!

The story we retell during this holiday season is not the story of a nice baby born to nice parents in a nice place under nice circumstances. The child was born to parents who were poor. His mother had become pregnant under unusual, if not dubious, circumstances. He was born in Bethlehem because his parents were compelled to go there under orders from an oppressive regime. He was born outdoors, his first bed was a feeding trough, because there was no room for his parents in the inn. Perhaps the inn was too crowded, or perhaps there was just no room for them.

It's the story of a *wretched* baby born to *wretched* parents in a *wretched* place under *wretched* circumstances! He was despised and rejected, abused and ignored. Those are Isaiah's words, words not used to describe Jesus, but to describe the suffering servant of the Lord, the Lord's suffering servant people Israel. But Jesus' followers, and maybe even Jesus himself, very much saw Jesus, saw the meaning of his life and the meaning of his death, in these words.

*There was nothing attractive about him, nothing that would draw us to him ...  
He endured suffering and pain.*

It describes his life: his rejection by the Jewish leadership, the disdain of the people of his own hometown, his torture and cruel execution at the hands of the Roman occupiers, his abandonment and betrayal by his closest friends. His life was wretched. He was poor. He suffered abuse. He was sometimes utterly alone. And he spent most of his time among wretched people: poor people, sick people, rejected people, sinful people.

Why? Why was his life so wretched?

As with many "why" questions, this question is first of all unanswerable. His life was so wretched simply because that was the way it happened. His life couldn't have been any other way simply because it wasn't any other way. This is who he was. This is where and when he was born. And this is how he was treated.

But, at the same time, his life as it was became a vehicle for showing God's love to people, specifically, for showing God's love to wretched people. These are the people Jesus sought out and these are the people who sought out Jesus. Jesus met them on their turf, on their terms. He was ... one of them.

When they were with Jesus, wretched people felt noticed, understood, cared for, and, in a very real and very personal way, valued. Jesus embodies the love of God by meeting wretched people where they are, by welcoming them as they are, by being -- not just pretending to be -- one of them. I do not believe the love of God could be authentically communicated, or accepted, in any other way.

But Jesus does more than that! Jesus welcomes wretched people as they are, but does not leave them as they are. He doesn't just share their misery, but sets them free.

*[They] are healed by the punishment he suffered, made whole by the blows he received.*

This is a mystery, the mystery of redemptive suffering, but it is the heart of the good news told by Jesus and told about Jesus. In some way, by sharing the wretchedness of wretched people, by enduring the worst of what any wretched person has to endure, by taking on himself the abuse and scorn and rejection and cruelty they suffer, deserved and undeserved, he transforms their very wretchedness.

In some way, he exhausts the energy of the forces of oppression and evil, and exposes their ultimate weakness. In some way, he takes upon himself the guilt of guilty people and releases them of their debt to God and to each other. In some way, he dies for them and sets them free from the death sentence under which they have been living as long as they can remember.

Jesus embodies the love of God by meeting wretched people where they are and opening for them the door to the kingdom of God, the door to shalom. And so the story of Christmas, the birth of this man as the embodiment of God's love, is good news indeed for wretched people!

But what about us? We are not poor. We are not pitiful. We are not miserable. We are not oppressed. Most of us live lives that are, for the most part, happy and healthy and fulfilling. How can a message of good news for wretched people be good news for us?

It will be good news for us if and when we realize that we are wretched! When we acknowledge, when we own, what we are, when we stop pretending to be something we are not.

When we can look in the face of any wretched man, of any wretched woman, and see someone just like us.

When we know there is nothing that makes us any better, any more worthy, any more deserving of God's attention and God's good favor than anyone else.

When we believe that the love God offers through Jesus to wretched people is meant for us too, and when we learn to show God's love to other wretched people face-to-face, eye-to-eye, not patron to pauper, but person to person, wretched person to wretched person.

Then we can join them in singing:

*I love my God, who heard my cry and chased my grief away ...*