

## Who Has Believed God's Servant?

‡ not attractive (vv.1-2)

‡ despised and rejected (v.3)

In the Name of God's Servant, our Savior Jesus Christ, dear fellow redeemed:

When Isaiah the prophet was first commissioned, the LORD forgave his sins, then asked, *“Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”* Isaiah answered, *“Here am I. Send me!”* What was his message? The LORD said, *“Go and tell this people: ‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’ Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”* After that I'd ask the same question as Isaiah, *“For how long, O Lord?”* And he answered, *“Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, until the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken.”* Just a remnant of believers would be left like a *“stump in the land.”* (Isaiah 6:8-13 NIV84)

Not too promising, is it? So why are so many American Christians shocked that our society is increasingly selfish and godless? Israel's history was packed with miracles like Moses at the Red Sea, manna in the desert, and Jericho – “when the walls came a tumblin' down.” And still Isaiah had to ask the question that haunts us too tonight: **Who Has Believed God's Servant?** Would we say that He's...?

‡ not attractive (vv.1-2)

*“Who has believed our report, and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?”*<sup>2</sup>

There seemed to be plenty of **attractive** news in Israel, at least toward the end of good King Hezekiah's reign. His tunnel to bring water into Jerusalem worked, but the Assyrian army never got close enough to besiege the city or shoot an arrow there. He could not come close with his weapons or build a siege ramp against it” (Isaiah 37:33) because God intervened. After all his bragging as the head of his evil empire proud Sennacherib lost his army overnight. *“The angel of the LORD went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning—there were all the dead bodies! So Sennacherib king of Assyria broke camp and withdrew. He returned to Nineveh and stayed there.”* (Isaiah 37:36 NIV84) All that remained was for his two sons to murder him in the temple of his own idol – then escape unscathed. So much for the king's pride!

Have we not seen generous miracles from God in our own history? What about that tornado that nearly destroyed the British army after they burned Washington D.C. in the War of 1812? How about the still, calm waters of the Mediterranean Sea when the Allies had to cross for one of the great battles of World War II? How about Moe Berg, mediocre baseball player, fluent in 15 languages and very adept at spying? He blocked the Nazis' effort to build an atomic bomb by finding their factory in Norway for the Royal Air Force to destroy in a bombing raid. So many stories like these illustrate how God has kindly heard the prayers of Christians for mercy on our land, mercy in spite of our sins, to worship in freedom.

With all we know of God's grace on us, why must we also admit this with Isaiah about the LORD's Suffering Servant? *“He grew up before him like a tender plant and like a root from dry ground. He had no attractiveness and no majesty. We saw him, but nothing about his appearance made us desire*

<sup>1</sup> Midweek Lenten Series: *God's Servant + Our Savior* at New Life Evangelical Lutheran, Shoreview, Minnesota.

<sup>2</sup> The words of this sermon text are part of my draft review for a translation project. [M.C. 2/24/2016]

*him.*” While Jesus walked this earth and to human eyes even now, He is not at all impressive. Even when He did miracles, Jesus made them look so natural, then told people not to tell others. He was bound and determined to bring glory to God not for human wisdom or man’s idea of greatness and majesty.

The apostle Paul lamented the same thing by quoting this verse in Romans 10:16: *“Not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed our message?’”* The apostle John noticed the same thing: *“Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him. This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet: ‘Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?’”* (John 12:37f)<sup>3</sup>

We believers today are still shocked at unbelief all around us. We believe and proclaim God’s truth as clearly and eloquently as we can. Yet as in Bible times for Isaiah, Jesus, John and Paul, a part of the prophet’s mission has always been to confirm some in unbelief. Rejection of the gospel has dogged this work of the apostles, and our best efforts at witnessing are often rejected. How can anyone not believe Isaiah’s beautiful, eloquent words? They fulfill God’s prediction for His strange plan of salvation.

### ‡ despised and rejected (v.3)

**Who Has Believed God’s Suffering Servant?** *“He was despised and rejected by men, a man who knew grief and was intimately acquainted with suffering. Like one from whom people hide their faces, he was despised and we thought nothing of him.”*

Some of the ancient rabbis actually thought this meant the Messiah might have leprosy. Everyone was predicted to turn away from him in disgust. He would have no people left, certainly not the important members of society. Have we not already seen that in our readings of the Passion History of our Lord? All His disciples deserted Him and fled from the Garden when Jesus was arrested. Who was there with Jesus on trial before the high priests and the Sanhedrin? In the courtyard was Peter, but you know how that turned out by the time the rooster crowed twice. John was there too, known by the high priests’ family, but apparently silent while Jesus stood trial alone. He beaten, spit upon, slapped and slugged in the face, but who spoke up among Pilate’s soldiers or those of King Herod? Jesus had no men at all to relieve His suffering not even like US Marines dying together as a “Band of Brothers.”

We come to this season of Lent in sorrow and repentance because all too often we have *despised and rejected* Jesus by not speaking up when others are suffering grief. We could bring a word of comfort, but how often do we fear we might not know what to say? Do we sometimes *hide* our *face* from Him and act as if we *think nothing of him*? Israel’s land was overrun by a cruel foreign army that stole or destroyed all their harvests year after year. That would be like a robber following you to the bank and stealing your paycheck every month while the government was powerless to stop them. And still God preserved a faithful remnant who heard the Gospel from Isaiah and followed King Hezekiah with faithful gifts for God and country. Do you ever thank God for law and order? A steady banking system? Direct deposit or at least safety to and from the bank? Are we willing as a congregation to step up and faithfully serve our gracious God with generous offerings that reflect His generosity toward us?

What I love about the Holy Spirit’s message through Isaiah is what He does with every single one of the sins that come up against God’s people. This root of Jesse from the stump of David grew into the glorious Christ of God whose blood washes away each and every sin we ever committed or will commit. Indifference to God’s Word? Forgiven! Worry? Forgiven! Lust, covetousness, greed, idolatry! Forgiven! Forgiven! Forgiven! What more would we need to esteem Jesus in the highest honor with every breath we take? “Although I have Him oft’ forgot, His loving kindness changes not.”

**Who Has Believed God’s Servant?** By God’s grace you do. And so do I. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Braun, J. A. (2001). *Isaiah 40-66* (p. 222). Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Pub. House.

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