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Year A, Good Friday, Isaiah 52:13-53:12, John 18:1-19:42
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What was he thinking? We've been asking several questions of our traditional understanding of Jesus as we move through Holy Week this year, and now, on Good Friday, I want to press a bit more on the question of his suffering. Why did Jesus suffer—suffer to the point of feeling forsaken or abandoned by God? Couldn't there have been another way? Last night, at the Maundy Thursday service, I suggested that Jesus seemed to understand his suffering and death as a sacrifice that would finally defeat evil and inaugurate the kingdom of God. How might he have developed such a view of his mission?

We do know that, immediately after his last meal with the disciples, he went into a nearby garden to pray. During this prayer, he reveals that he is well aware of what's ahead of him, even if his disciples continued to be in denial, and he asks that, if possible, God, as a loving father, would take this cup from him. God does not, and he is betrayed by Judas and arrested. And the wheel of destiny turns for him. It's now Friday, and Jesus has been tried, found guilty of revolutionary intentions, and crucified. From the cross, at least in Mark's account, he cries out, quoting Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" So, again I ask, was there another way to accomplish his mission of defeating evil and inaugurating the kingdom of God without such suffering? Whatever we may think, Jesus did not see another way. He chose the go to Jerusalem, to confront evil as he saw it, and he believed his death was the way to do this. What was he thinking?

To answer this question, we must do just as Jesus did. He looked to scriptures to guide him and we must do the same. On this Good Friday, we have a reading from the “servant songs” of Isaiah that likely was one of those scriptures Jesus looked to for guidance. Christians have often read this passage as a direct reference to Jesus and some Jews also read these songs as a reference to the Messiah. The vast majority of Jews, however, believed the suffering in these songs referred to the Jewish people as a whole, and they did not believe the Messiah himself would suffer; they especially did not believe the Messiah would die for their sins.

But Jesus, and at least some other Jews of his time, would have read these songs as a confirmation that the suffering of the righteous among them was, somehow, within the overall purposes of God—in other words, that their suffering would in certain times and places be the *means* by which God would redeem them. Jesus’ own understanding thus seems to have been somewhere between the wider Jewish belief that the suffering servant referred to the whole of Israel and the full-blown atonement theology of the early Christians as handed down by Paul and others.

I suggested on Palm Sunday that Jesus died on a cross because he was seen as a revolutionary by the Jewish leaders and the Roman authorities. But as Christians, we also believe there was more to it than that. Jesus actually seemed to choose his death when he probably could have avoided it by simply staying away from Jerusalem during Passover—yes, he was a revolutionary of sorts, but he was also a non-violent revolutionary, and he thus might have slid under the radar, so to speak, if he hadn’t forced the issue. But, as we know, he did force the issue.

Jesus seemed to have seen himself as one called to take on the punishment, the exile, of Israel itself and he seem to believe that God would act through his suffering to effect Israel's redemption. Jesus would act out on the cross—in his own person as the Messiah and representative of the people as a whole—the suffering that he himself prophesied for Jerusalem, the Temple, and the Jewish people generally. Moreover, Jesus viewed his death as something different than the deaths of earlier Jewish martyrs, martyrs who also believed they were dying to help Israel escape from God's punishment. However, they also believed that the rest of the world would continue on toward its destruction, whereas Jesus viewed his death as accomplishing that which God had originally called the people of Israel to do, namely, to be a witness of God's goodness and faithfulness *to the entire world*.

So, did Jesus die for *us*, as we so often hear? For you and me, personally? Yes and no. No, in the sense that Jesus seemed to die as a martyr in one last symbolic action intended in take on the role of the Temple sacrifices and to call his own people, the Jews, to be the people God wanted them to be from the beginning—a light shining on a hill, a witness to the creator's original purposes for humans generally. But yes, Jesus could also be said to die for us in the sense that, in calling Jews to their world-embracing mission, he was also including us, you and me, in his embrace. In this way, it makes sense to say that Jesus died for us. Said differently, Jesus died to inaugurate the kingdom of God and his vision for the kingdom of God included those who were called out from the wider Jewish community (his disciples), but also those who were not Jews and who would join that community after his crucifixion.

It would be the Apostle Paul, 15-25 years after the crucifixion, who would hammer out the theology that eventually emerged as the dominant view of what Jesus did and why he did it. We'll look at that in future sermons. For now, I hope we have a fuller and more complete understanding of why, from Jesus' perspective, he willingly suffered and died on a cross, feeling forsaken and abandoned not only by his friends, but also by God. Yes, he was crucified as a failed Messiah by Rome, but his apparent failure was finally his victory, his triumph over evil and over death itself, the last enemy. In his death, he seemed to believe he was taking on the role of Israel's suffering as the servant of God in order, finally, to bring the entire world into God's embrace and under the dominion of God's kingdom.

The scope of this audacious vision leaves me without words to express my astonishment. I can only say that I'm profoundly grateful. Amen.