

September 15, 2024
Lectionary 24, Year B
The 17th Sunday after Pentecost
Isaiah 50:4-9a
Mrk 8:27-38
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Weary

“The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.” (Isaiah 50:4a)

So spoke the suffering servant, a figure in the book of prophecy known as Second Isaiah. Second Isaiah is the part of the book of Isaiah that is addressed to the exiles in Babylon. There are four servant songs in Isaiah and today’s Old Testament reading is one of them.

No one knows for sure who the suffering servant in Isaiah is. Is it the prophet himself? Does it represent a personified image of the exiled people of Israel? Is it someone else, whose name has been lost to history?

Early Christians read the words of the suffering servant and they saw and heard Jesus in them.

They saw Jesus in the servant’s uncomplaining submission to the scorn, derision, and violence of his adversaries. They saw Jesus in the servant’s submission on the teaching of the Lord. They saw Jesus in the servant’s confidence in his ultimate vindication. “It is the Lord GOD who helps me. Who shall declare me guilty?” (Isaiah 50:9a)

As for me, I think perhaps it is both. I think that the servant probably referred to something or someone, a person, a nation, the prophet, in Isaiah’s time, but also points to the coming of Jesus, the patient one, the obedient one, the suffering one, the vindicated one, the teacher, the servant, the one who is with us today.

I've said before that one of the things I love about being a Christian is that there are so many things to celebrate in the church year, with festivals and holidays popping up all over the place, drawing us close to the story of Jesus and the communion of saints even when we're just going about our daily lives; going to work or school, or sports practices or games, or rehearsals or concerts, or traveling or running errands, or just spending time quietly at home.

Yesterday was one of those days. Yesterday was Holy Cross Day, a festival that dates back to the 7th century, that celebrates the cross on which Jesus died, how a tool of suffering, torture, domination, and death became a symbol of life, of hope, of love, of victory. So, while I was going about my day yesterday, going to a meeting, working in the office, going to a soccer game and a high school musical, and while you were going about yours, we were doing it on a day when we were invited to remember Jesus' suffering, death, and victory. Jesus who came to us as the suffering servant, who came to teach, to embrace, to call, and who, "gave his back to those who struck him, and his cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; who did not hide his face from insult and spitting." (Isaiah 50:6 paraphrase)

Jesus, who was helped and vindicated by the God in whom in trusted. The same Jesus, who in our gospel reading for today says,

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? (Mark 8:34-36)

This is a somewhat overwhelming teaching, a teaching that puzzled Jesus' closest followers in his day, a teaching that drove some of Jesus' followers away, a

teaching that Christians have struggled with from the earliest days of the church. A teaching that we are invited to struggle with today.

And for some of us it would really be a struggle, for it sounds like Jesus is saying that we need to pick up one more thing, one more burden, one more thing to do, to add to our ever-growing lists of physical, mental and emotional tasks. Now we are to deny ourselves and take up our cross and lose our lives. What does that look like?

“The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.” (Isaiah 50:4a)

Those words, the words of the suffering servant, words that we have been invited by the church to hear as the words of Jesus down through the centuries came to me as pure balm, as healing oil this week. Because I come, and perhaps you do too, to this place, to this day, to worship, weary. Wearing by the suffering and struggling of the world around us:

- Another school shooting, another reminder that we are not safe, our kids are not safe.
- Escalating war in the middle east, war on two fronts, devastation, starvation, in Gaza.
- War in Ukraine, in Sudan, in Myanmar, and, no doubt in places we’ve not heard of, places that don’t get the press.
- People fleeing war, famine, climate disasters in a world that has no room for them, no welcome for them, no place for them.
- A polarizing and exhausting election cycle.

And then there is our own lives, our own circles of concern, our own family members and friends going through own struggles and their own suffering, sickness, mental health crisis, divorce, financial difficulties.

In addition to all of that, there is life marching on, work and school, and yes, even fun, but sometimes even our own abundance can be wearying as we go from thing to thing to thing to thing, games, practices, concerts, shows, celebrations, things we're glad to do, but can take a lot out of us. And sometimes it can feel wrong to be happy when there is so much suffering in the world.

It seems that what we need more than ever is that blessing, that balm of a sustaining word spoken to the weary.

Instead, we hear this?

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? (Mark 8:34-36)

And all it sounds like is another mysterious and painful burden that we are supposed to take on.

But perhaps that's not quite right. We have to ask ourselves, what did the cross look like for Jesus?

It was of course, a reality of torture, of pain, of humiliation. It was not a symbol, but a fact of suffering.

But what else was it? It was a symbol of "Thy will be done". It was the fact that Jesus was required by the will of God to submit to the fleeting authority of an earthly empire, to submit to the cross.

But it was also a symbol of victory and vindication. Jesus truly believed that on the third day he would be raised. He trusted that the one who would vindicate him would be near. He trusted in God who would help him. He was faithful to God and God was faithful to him. The will of God was his own will in the matter of the cross, and it was, for him, the defeat of a moment, compared with a victory that was eternal.

So, perhaps taking up our cross does not mean taking on some new burden of suffering, leaving behind that which we love and taking on some new and wearying task, some new heaviness to carry in a world, in a life that feels heavy enough already.

While I'm certain that we, as Christians, are called to make sacrifices, large and small for the sake of the people around us, who are, as we are, God's beloved, I think that taking up our cross also means that we are to approach life through the lens of Jesus, who saw beyond the suffering, the weariness of this present moment and had hope in the God who helps, the God who vindicates, the God who brings life. And we are invited to take up that cross, and have hope, have trust, have faith, have confidence that God is with us, will help us, will never let us go, will sustain us, even when the going is hard; even when we are weary. For Jesus, walked this road too, and he still walks it with us, and the Lord God has given him the tongue of a teacher, that he would know how to sustain the weary with a word. Amen.