

Title: *Led to Slaughter*

Text: Isaiah 52:13-53:12

German theologian Helmut Thielicke tells the story of a young [soldier] who reached out to pick a bouquet of lilacs and uncovered the half-decayed body of [another] soldier beneath the bush: “He drew back in horror, not because he had never seen a dead man before — he drew back because of the screaming contradiction between the dead man and the flowering bush.”

Thielicke notes that the soldier's reaction would have been different if the man had come upon a dead and faded lilac bush instead: “A blooming lilac bush will one day become a withered lilac bush—this is really nothing more than the operation of the rhythm of life—but that a man should be lying there in a decayed condition, this was something that simply did not fit, and that's why he winced at the sight of it.”

When we look at the passion of Jesus Christ, the events surrounding it and what happened there, there are several paradoxes that all seem to find some expression in the words of the suffering servant song in Isaiah 53. The paradoxical nature of Jesus' ministry is seen in the fact that we often use a lamb – a symbol of vulnerability and timidity – to represent him and his mission.

The first paradox is that one with such an extraordinary mission would have such an ordinary appearance.

We see Jesus Christ as an exalted servant. That's strange. Servants don't get exalted. Servants serve and a good servant's only reward is the pleasure of his or her master. But Isaiah tells us about a wise servant who will be exalted. Oh, at first people would look at him and think that there wasn't really anything special about him. In fact, after he had accomplished his mission, people were actually appalled at him. He was disfigured beyond what any reasonably attractive human being ought to look like. He suffered and that suffering took its toll on him. But, just as his suffering caused many to be appalled at him, his work will sprinkle many nations.

There is something mysterious about the work of Christ. What was not told will be seen and what was not heard will be understood. There's something in us that can resonate with the story of Jesus. The writer to Ecclesiastes says that God has put eternity in our hearts. We are made with the awareness that this life is not all there is. We hunger for more. We're able to sense the brokenness of life in this aeon. We sense that it is our sin that has led to the brokenness. We also believe that a moral, righteous God will have to deal with that sin. There's something beautiful about Jesus Christ's willingness to suffer because of our sin.

In 1993, [Philip Yancey] read a news report about a “Messiah sighting” in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, New York. In an article for Christianity Today magazine, he wrote about the feverish response of over 20,000 Lubavitcher Hasidic Jews who lived in the region, many of whom believed the Messiah was dwelling among them in the person of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson:

Word of the rabbi's public appearance spread like a flash fire through the streets of Crown Heights, and Lubavitchers in their black coats and curly sidelocks were soon dashing toward the synagogue where the rabbi customarily prayed. The lucky ones connected to a network of beepers got a head start, sprinting toward the synagogue the instant they felt a slight vibration. They jammed by the hundreds into a main hall, elbowing each other and even climbing the pillars to create more room. The hall filled with an air of anticipation and frenzy normally found at a championship sporting event, not a religious service.

The rabbi was 91 years old. He had suffered a stroke the year before and had not been able to speak since. When the curtain finally pulled back, those who had crowded into the synagogue saw a frail old man with a long beard who could do little but wave, tilt his head, and move his eyebrows. No one in the audience seemed to mind, though. "Long live our master, our teacher, and our rabbi, King, Messiah, forever and ever!" they sang in unison, over and over, building in volume until the rabbi made a small gesture with his hand and the curtain closed. They departed slowly, savoring the moment, in a state of ecstasy. (Rabbi Schneerson [later] died in June 1994. Now some Lubavitchers [still await] his bodily resurrection.)

Yancey confesses he was tempted to laugh out loud as he read about Schneerson and his followers, thinking, *Who are these people trying to kid a nonagenarian mute Messiah in Brooklyn?* But then a sobering thought came to mind for Yancey: *I am reacting to Rabbi Schneerson exactly as people in the first century had reacted to Jesus. A Messiah from Galilee? A carpenter's kid, no less?* He writes:

The scorn I felt as I read about the rabbi and his fanatical followers gave me a small glimpse of the kind of responses Jesus faced throughout his life. His neighbors asked, "Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas? Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?" Other countrymen scoffed, "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" His own family tried to put him away, believing he was out of his mind. The religious experts sought to kill him. As for the common people, one moment they judged him demon-possessed and raving mad, the next they forcibly tried to crown him king.

It took courage, I believe, for God to lay aside power and glory and to take his place among human beings who would greet him with the same mixture of haughtiness and skepticism that I felt when I first heard about Rabbi Schneerson of Brooklyn. It took courage to endure the shame, and courage even to risk descent to a planet known for its clumsy violence, among a race known for rejecting its prophets. A God of all power deliberately put himself in such a state that Satan could tempt him, demons could taunt him, and lowly human beings could slap his face and nail him to a cross. What more foolhardy thing could God have done?

Jesus' face was marred beyond any human likeness, but kings will shut their mouths because of him. That leads into the next paradox of Jesus which is seen in one who showed

us God's love would be hated and despised.

Some folks would ask, "Who would believe such a report? to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?" This suffering servant would be born in a hostile environment. He would come into this world as a vulnerable baby and would first lay his head down on a manger of straw. The deranged king would be so threatened by the announcement of his birth that he would go on a crusade to kill all of the male children under two years of age. He grew up like a tender shoot in dry ground. Picture a drought so severe that the crops are all withering and the fruit is struggling to be born on the vine and you have a picture of what the life of God's messiah is like. What is surprising about Jesus is that there was nothing extraordinary in his appearance. There was no visible aura around him that caused people to say, "There's something special about him. I'll follow him." No beauty or majesty to attract us to him. Oh, he said to Peter, "Follow me," and Peter followed him. The Woman at the Well went to all of the people of her village and said, "Come meet a man who told me everything I ever did." Mary wept at his feet and anointed his feet with her tears. Yes Jesus was attractive but it was in the force of his compassion, the conviction of his call, and the love that came radiating out from his eyes. That's why it's so paradoxical that this one would be despised and rejected by me, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Rather than embracing him, it's our nature to turn from him. Have you ever had the experience of really not liking someone and trying as best you could to avoid making eye contact with them because you would rather not acknowledge them? That's the way we treated Jesus. He was despised and we esteemed him not.

But while we were turning our faces from Jesus, he was turning his mercy and compassion toward us. He took up our infirmities. He carried our sorrows, but we thought that he was being punished by God for something that he had done. But when he was receiving the lashes prior to his crucifixion, it was for my sin and for your sin. Funny, his punishment would bring us peace. His wounds would bring the healing from our sin-wrecked, human condition. All of us like sheep have gone astray but God laid on him the iniquity of us all. Imagine being a Jew prior to the time of Christ and having the responsibility of offering up a lamb as a sacrifice for your sins. Listen to the bleating of the sheep. Look at the innocence in its eyes. Feel the terror as it tries to wiggle free from the knife that will pierce its heart. Then realize that if it were not for your sin, this all would be so unnecessary.

Imagine the anguish of a God who loves his only begotten Son and loves the humanity that is now estranged from him as he watches His Son being beaten, spit upon, and nailed to the cross. God was powerful enough to stop it. Jesus could have called 10,000 angels to destroy the world and set him free. But, because of his great love for us, "he died alone for you and me." That's an ugly picture. It's a humbling picture but it's the picture that makes me able to rejoice this morning. It's the picture that motivates me to worship this

morning because when Jesus was hanging on the cross, my sin was on the cross. The penalty has been paid and I now can be free from the burden of my sin. I don't understand it. I just accept it and rejoice in it.

Though there were auspicious signs that preceded and accompanied his birth, preparing the world for the majestic and kingly, the birth of Jesus itself was of the humblest peasant parentage, in an unimportant town, and in the roughest of buildings. He made a career of rejecting marks of status or privilege: He loved lepers, washed the feet of his disciples, befriended little children, encouraged women to join his entourage, and, finally, submitted to crucifixion by a foreign power.

This servant of God was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth. Ridicule upon ridicule, insult upon insult, abuse upon abuse was piled on Jesus but he didn't say anything. Like a sheep before his shearers is silent, Jesus didn't open his mouth or say anything. He was taken away by oppression and judgment. Descendants? He didn't have any of his own -- just you and me who by faith trust that his suffering takes our sin away. Even in the brief period of time that he was dead, he lay in a borrowed grave because the foxes had holes, birds had nests but the Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head.

But in some strange way, it was the LORD's will to allow him to suffer. His life was poured out as a guilt offering for you and for me. But, one day, he will see his offspring, his days will be prolonged. Because of the joy that was set before him, Jesus endured the cross, despising its shame. He knew that after all of the agony will be reconciliation with men and women that he loves. God's will will be accomplished in him and through him. After his suffering, he will see the light of life. That is because when he hung on that cross, my sin and your sin was upon him. It just falls to us to accept it and believe it. His life was poured out toward death and was numbered among the transgressors.

Jesus endured all of this because he was willing to bear the sins of us all and not only to suffer on account of our sins but to intercede for us all the while.

Yes, I look at the Suffering Servant and all of my values are stood on their head. The desire for power seems so worthless in the light of Jesus' suffering and death. God's strength was made perfect in Jesus' weakness on the cross. My desire for fame and reputation are hollow when I contemplate the cross of Christ. The things that I think are so important are trivial in the light of the lamb of God suffering all of this for me.

Preached at Salem Avenue. March 27, 2011 a.m.