

Pastor Roy's sermon from October 21, 2018 (Heritage Day at St. John's)

What makes a good leader? Does it matter how a leader gets things done? Does process affect outcome? Have you ever worked for someone who used intimidation and manipulation to get things done? Does that kind of leadership inspire us? Or is it a cheap short cut? As desired as immediate results might be, what are the side-effects of anxiety, fear-prone people? And on the other hand, what is the benefit of compassion and concern for another beyond whether or not I get exactly what I want and when I want it?

Jesus took his leadership cues from Isaiah's servant Psalms. That is likely the reason we see so much of Jesus in Isaiah 53. It was part of his playbook for ministry. We might think of Jesus receiving his call from God right after he was baptized in the Jordan by John, but I believe he received his call as he listened to the scrolls read in nearby synagogues. Jesus went into ministry with his eyes open. He was not expecting to be taken care of, but to take care of those before him. He was not expecting to be served but to serve. And he was expecting to suffer under the weight of the needs of his people. He came to discover the freedom of consecration to God in service to God's people. Difficulty was no surprise.

All of us probably at some point are tempted to take advantage of any power we have, to trust in power. Sometimes we even think of God mainly in terms of power rather than in terms of the One who provides, loves, supports, and is present without exception or limitation.

Jesus did not live and die a life of sacrifice and consecration because he knew he was on the winning team in the end. He so lived and died because he knew that was the nature of God. He forsook the greedy power mongers of his day and embraced those they rejected and despised—the sick, women, traditional sinners, and the poor in general. He was deeply in touch with God and knew that no other life was worth living or dying for.

Listen to Isaiah 53:4-10:

Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,

so he did not open his mouth.
By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.
They made his grave with the wicked
and his tomb with the rich,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain.
When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;
through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.
Out of his anguish he shall see light;
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;
because he poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.

Isaiah 53 does not speak exclusively of Jesus. This and the other servant Psalms in Isaiah speak of all good leaders among God's children. If we make Isaiah 53 a prophesy of Jesus alone, then we may lose sight of the fact that this passage also tells us about the nature of God who calls the prophet, the leader, the servant. We also might miss that this chapter is an important playbook for every servant in the church.

Also, when we feel the things that Jesus felt in his life and in his death we might feel like failures, but the opposite is true, to serve in love is to suffer, to be uncertain; but faith is listening for God's presence to lead and guide into peace.

Serving is a tricky thing. Faith does not assure us that we will never err. Quite the opposite, faith gives us courage to err, to take chances for God's love and mercy. To occasionally or maybe quite often look like a fool. To fall down and to rise up. To be uncertain, but to continue on, led by the Spirit of Love, not power, not might; but compassionate love. Beginning with prayer God has us by the hand, and ultimately the results are in God's hands, not ours. May we rediscover the freedom and joy of serving as Christ served, with the Spirit of Christ's love leading us today. Amen.