

TEXT (English translation: NRSV)

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.

(1)

It's a scene from the days of the early church. Philip had been one of Jesus's closest twelve disciples, and, in the time since Jesus's resurrection, he's become a leader in the church movement that was called forth by Christ's resurrection Spirit.

On a wilderness road between Jerusalem and Gaza, Philip comes across a court official of the queen of the Ethiopians. This court official is reading a passage from the book of the prophet Isaiah and can't understand who it is that the prophet is talking about. Philip offers to help. The passage is about someone who was led to the slaughter like a sheep; someone who went to that slaughter with the silence of a sheep before its shearer; someone who was treated unjustly by others and was humiliated by them; someone who was put to death. Philip takes note of Isaiah's words and, beginning with those words, goes on to declare to that official the *good news* about *Jesus*.

(2)

Jesus emphatically identified himself with the prophetic movement whose story was told in the Bible. Those prophets had decried the ungodliness, the sinfulness, that they said God sees systemically at work in all human government; they had denounced existing forms of human governance as expressions of a callously greedy will-to-power set on furthering the interests and ends of a few, at the expense of the good and the well-being of the wider community; moreover, they had declared that God is going to end the present evil order of things through God's own justice and peace to come. And Jesus identified his cause with the cause of that prophetic movement. "I have come to fulfill the prophets," he said.

The words we just heard Philip connect to the gospel of Jesus are from one of four passages in the book of the prophet Isaiah that introduce into the prophetic literature a mysterious figure whom we have come to refer to as the Suffering Servant of the Lord. (See, for example: Norman Gottwald, *A Light to the Nations*, 1959, pp.399-426.) This is a unique servant of God, who is going to usher in God's new world order in an unexpected way, namely: not through coercion but through *love*; not on behalf of a particular people but on behalf of *all* the world; not to honor the godly and deserving but to redeem the *ungodly* and *undeserving*; and not by yielding to a

callously greedy will-to-power but through, of all things, *self-sacrifice* and *personal suffering*.

Prior to Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection, his disciples saw in him primarily a worker of signs and wonders who bestowed wisdom, evoked sublime feelings, and gave promise of the soon-to-arrive triumph of the kingdom of God. They didn't think of Jesus in terms of Isaiah's Suffering Servant. Even though Jesus told them time and again that his mission would lead him into the heart of suffering and death, they didn't know how to take that seriously. They were as if incapable of thinking about God's new world order in Suffering Servant terms. It was only at some point *following* Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection, that they came to recognize in Isaiah's Suffering Servant what Jesus himself had seen all along as his own calling, his own course, his own life and mission, his own purpose and way.

Today is Passion Sunday on the worship calendar of the church. Today we commemorate the first day of what would turn out to be Jesus's final week in Jerusalem before being crucified there. Jesus knew on that day that he was entering Jerusalem as God's Suffering Servant. That already had been his path up to now, and the path had been difficult, hard, even humiliating. But it was during the final week that his life and mission, his purpose and way, most clearly and visibly displayed the contours of the figure we know from Isaiah as God's Suffering Servant. During this final week, Jesus is going to be ridiculed, hounded, belittled, shamed, bullied, betrayed, deserted, beaten, humiliated, tortured, and declared dead – his death coming through execution on a cross as a blasphemous and criminal threat to imperial law and order and peace. Today, riding into Jerusalem on an humble donkey as in intentional contrast to the Roman governor who had arrived ahead of him on a mighty steed, with a proud display of imperial pomp and splendor and a powerful procession of armed Roman cavalry and foot soldiers, Jesus knows what lies ahead. The disciples, however, do not. It was only *looking back* on this week from the perspective of Christ's *resurrection*, that the disciples themselves finally began to see and value in Jesus the Suffering Servant of the Lord.

What I would like to do now, is read aloud for you the four portrayals of the Suffering Servant in the book of the prophet Isaiah, that later became the path that Jesus knew would be demanded of the one sent by God to bring God's good news to a sinful world. The fourth passage is the one that Philip started out from, that day on a wilderness road, in proclaiming the good news about Jesus. Here are all four of Isaiah's portrayals of the Suffering Servant of the Lord:

1. *Isaiah 42:1-4* Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

2. *Isaiah 49:1-6* Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me. He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." But I said, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God." And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the Lord, and my God has become my strength — he says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

3. *Isaiah 50:4-9* The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens-- wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty? All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.

4. *Isaiah 52:13-53:12* See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high. Just as there were many who were astonished at him — so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals — so he shall startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which had not been told them they shall see, and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate. Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account. 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.

(3)

Children sometimes say aloud what grown-ups don't dare let themselves think.

The scene was an old cathedral in Germany. Along one wall stood a life-size and very imposing crucifix – a statue of Jesus stretched in all his tortured and bloody agony upon the cross. It looked all too real to the small child of a couple of American tourists there that afternoon. They were Protestants, and the child was accustomed to statues of the *empty* cross of the *risen* Lord. However, upon seeing this gruesome, life-size statue of the *crucified* one, the child, disconcerted, looks up and asks, “*Who is that?*” “That’s Jesus, God’s son,” replied one of the parents. The child looked to the crucifix, then back to the parents, and said simply, “No.” And if the parents were honest with themselves, they might have thought, “We’re not so sure ourselves, what to make of a tortured Son of God, a suffering Savior, a dying Christ.”

The truth is, a tortured, suffering and dying Christ is *not* what we would have expected, any more than did the first disciples of Jesus. A Christ crucified is *not* where we, by nature, would have sought the reality, truth, and presence of *God*. Give us signs and wonders; give us wisdom; give us sublimity and triumph; give us blissful feelings; give us ecstatic experiences. But a *crucifixion*? *God*? *Maker of heaven and earth*? It is *utterly shocking* to think that *God's Word* to us should be heard through someone who sat imprisoned on death row; someone who, in his final agony, was beaten and stripped naked and held up to public ridicule; someone who was tortured and killed on a cross – broken, dirty, bloody – in the hands of a mob – at the behest of the religious establishment – by decree of state government. *Did someone say God?! Maker of heaven and earth?! It is shocking, is it not? It is shocking.* At least it would be, if we hadn't read the *end* of the book. Yet we *have* read the end of the book! We already know that Good Friday was followed by Easter Sunday. We belong to those who know that the one who calls us is the crucified *yet now resurrected* Jesus Christ.

But, how honest are *we* being now? How ready *are* we, in fact, to find the reality, truth, and presence of *God* in the *crucified* Christ? Why would almighty God come among us as a suffering servant? Moreover, just how ready are *you*, really, to hear and heed almighty *God* in the words of a Jesus on his way to the *cross*, calling, "Come, follow me"? Are you really ready for a God who actually takes on rather than putting an end to suffering – indeed a God who doesn't just accompany you *in* your sufferings, but who insists that *you, too*, suffer for the sake of the *gospel*? Wouldn't you prefer a more indulgent, a more accommodating, God – a God who lets you be who you like to be – who leaves you in your comfort zone – rather than demanding self-denial, cross-bearing, risk-taking, and even the giving up of your very life for the sake of the gospel of Jesus? *Where* – we find ourselves thinking – *where is the "good news" in a Christ such as that?*

It is hard to understand – it is *hard* to let it really sink in – that the *creator* of your life and my life has chosen to speak to us decisively through someone naked, abandoned, rejected, and dying on a cross – someone who had called to followers and, hanging from that horrifically terrible instrument of torture and death, still calls, saying: "*Come, follow me.*"

Still – yet – nevertheless – and despite the shocking sound of it – that is what we are given to hear this Passion Sunday, this first day of the week of the Passion of the Christ: *the passage of scripture was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." Then Philip began to speak, and, starting with this scripture, he proclaimed the good news about Jesus.*

The good news about Jesus is not simply that he is the resurrected one, but that his calling, his course, his life and mission, his purpose and way, was that of God's *Suffering Servant* – the one who, not through coercion but through *love*, not on behalf of a particular people but on behalf of *all* the world, not to honor the godly and deserving but to redeem the *ungodly* and *undeserving*, and not by yielding to a callously greedy will-to-power but through *self-sacrifice* and *personal suffering*, came among us to bring an end the present evil order of things by offering his life for the sake of God's own justice and peace to come – and calling to us on his way, saying: "Come, follow me."

That is the good news about Jesus that has been entrusted to us, in and as his church, to strive to understand. That is the good news about Jesus that we, in and as his church, are called to serve. May we, in and as Christ's church, give our passionate best to that striving and our compassionate best to that service. Amen.