

The Suffering Servant and Assigning Blame  
The Rev. Amy Spagna  
Good Friday – April 7, 2023  
Isaiah 52:13-53:12

If Palm Sunday was the trailer for this film, today is the main event, the thing we've come to the theater and plunked down our money to see for ourselves. And it does not disappoint. The storyline has it all: the villains, the hero, the mob bent on killing the hero, the people who ran away because they were scared to death, and the few quiet ones watching from the sidelines who understand exactly what's going on and are powerless to stop it. The story is so compelling that we can't turn away, as much as we might want to. It's the story of a relative nobody who's done nothing wrong, other than speaking truth to power and challenging it to live up to the ideals it preached. Power didn't like hearing that truth – it never does – and so it has him executed.

It is still a lot to take in, especially in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century America. We don't want to spend a whole lot of time even thinking about death, much less confronting it head on as this day forces us to. It's much easier to turn the page quickly, rather than dwelling on it – and with good reason. It's doubly the case when we're faced with death in a form that's as cruel as crucifixion was. Ancient historians only hinted at how bad it was, because their readers were well aware of exactly what crucifixion entailed. Even Cicero, the great Roman orator and statesman, described crucifixion only as "the most miserable and most painful punishment appropriate to slaves alone," and spared his audience the rest of the gory details.<sup>1</sup> They knew that this humiliating and horrifying punishment was reserved for non-citizens, slaves, and particularly those who dared to

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<sup>1</sup> K.B. Vogelmann, "Cicero's Prosecution of Murder By Crucifixion." <https://theodds.website/ciceros-prosecution-of-murder-by-crucifixion/> [accessed April 4, 2023].

challenge Roman authority. "The words posted above Jesus' head on the cross, then, were not an epitaph, but an accusation— the accusation that brought him to the cross: 'Jesus the Nazarene, the king of the Jews.' When Christians reflect on the cross, we cannot forget this obvious truth: Jesus was a political prisoner, executed by the Roman state on the charge of insurrection. The Jews did not kill Jesus, friends— Rome did."<sup>2</sup>

That's the *what*. The *why* is more mystifying, and in a way even more difficult to swallow. Once we start to dig into the past to try to understand what's happening in the present, we start finding explanations which totally sideline the political reasons for Jesus' murder. They get into the realm of things like vicarious suffering and the idea of substitutionary atonement. Both of them insist that Jesus suffered and died so nobody else would have to, ever again. They aren't wrong, as we've come to explain it – but we do have to be careful with taking them too far. Many of those ideas originate with Isaiah's so-called Suffering Servant. Again: it's worth remembering that the Servant is NOT Jesus, but a close analog for him. It's easy to see why the early Church would have made that connection. Like the Servant, Jesus was "oppressed, and he was afflicted... he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of [God's] people" (Isa. 53:7-8, NRSV).

This is the definition of suffering – which Jesus endures on account of everyone else who's involved in perpetrating this tragedy. But. We've got to ask: is it really necessary? Couldn't God have chosen another, less painful and less traumatic way to accomplish God's purposes? And, if God's purposes have indeed been fulfilled through this event, why does human suffering still exist – particularly when we inflict it on one

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<sup>2</sup> Steven Tuell, "Nailed to the Cross." <https://steventuell.net/nailed-to-the-cross/> [accessed April 4, 2023].

another? Why do we continue to ask the innocent to continue to bear the painful brunt of greed and conflict? When will we finally wise up and put an end to this kind of suffering?<sup>3</sup> And what will it take?

The answer to that one is not found here – at least, not today, and not on this hill outside of Jerusalem, where the Romans have made an example out of a rabbi from Nazareth and a couple of career criminals. What is clear is that human sinfulness, as manifest in the jealousy of the religious leaders, Pilate's dual fear of the crowds and his bosses back home, and the screaming of the mob who egged him on, is one of the root causes of this awful scene. It's precisely that sinfulness which has contributed to assigning blame for this event to anyone but the responsible parties. It's all too easy to point the finger elsewhere, at our Jewish siblings, at Black or brown or Indigenous people, at immigrants, at women, and so on- anything to avoid being honest about our own role, however small, in the suffering of the world."<sup>4</sup>

Asking for accountability in the face of a tragedy like the Crucifixion is hard. Our instincts are to lean into our grief as we watch the scene unfold more than anything else. There's absolutely nothing wrong with that. Grief is an essential part of what it is to be human, as well as essential for adjusting to the "new normal" that follows a devastating loss. As a process, grief, particularly in the face of a traumatic event, nearly always includes some sort of self-reflection in its end stages. Gene Kranz, the

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<sup>3</sup> Claudia Highbaugh, "Homiletical Perspective: Isaiah 52:13-53:12." *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2 (Lent through Eastertide)*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 285.

<sup>4</sup> Brennan Breed, "Commentary on Isaiah 52:13-53:12." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/good-friday/commentary-on-isaiah-5212-5312-13> [accessed April 3, 2023].

legendary Apollo flight director, spent the weekend after a launch pad fire that killed three astronauts in 1967 mired in that process of grief and self-reflection. When he returned to work the following Monday, Kranz gathered his team of young flight controllers together, and famously told them: "We were the cause. We were not ready. We did not do our job... [and] we are forever accountable for what we do or what we fail to do."<sup>5</sup>

No human did their job, either, when it came to Jesus' death. But like the staff of Mission Control, who had to reckon with how to get going again in the face of a tragedy none of them ever expected, we, as the heirs of the disciples who first told the story about this tragedy which they didn't expect, also have a chance to make it right. The part that's up to us starts and ends with seeing his image in everyone we meet, regardless of their status, and with looking in the mirror and asking ourselves how we might have contributed to the forces which keep fastening Jesus to the cross now. As for how God will use it... you'll have to wait until the sequel comes out on Sunday to find out.

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<sup>5</sup> "The Kranz Dictum." <https://jarango.com/2019/11/22/the-kranz-dictum/> [accessed April 4, 2023].