

Making the Crooked Straight: Awaiting a Savior who Unbends our Sin

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
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Isaiah 1:1-20; 53:4-6

Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina* opens in the home of a 19th century Russian family in upheaval. For three days, the five Oblonsky children have had the run of the house. The servants have lacked direction. The wife, Dolly, has been in her room, steeling her nerve to pack up the kids and head to her mother's house.

Stiva, the likeable, carefree husband, has broken his wife's trust. He foolishly thinks that Dolly has known about his choices but has turned a blind eye to his behavior. So when Dolly first confronts him, Stiva is totally unable to acknowledge his wrong.

Tolstoy writes: "There happened to [Stiva] at that instant what happen[s] to people when they are unexpectedly caught in something very disgraceful... Instead of being hurt, denying, defending himself, begging forgiveness, instead of remaining indifferent even... his face utterly involuntarily assumed its habitual, good-humored, and therefore idiotic smile. This idiotic smile he could not forgive himself." Dolly sees the smile, shudders, unleashes some cruel words, and runs from the room. And then she won't see her husband for days." It's that idiotic smile that's to blame for it all," Stiva thinks. If Stiva believes the real root of the problem is the "idiotic smile," he has another problem on his hands. His relationship with his wife is a lot worse off than he wants to think. And restoration of his marriage is going to take more than acknowledging a poorly-timed grin. Like Stiva, Judah has a denial problem. Judah's relationship with the Holy One is a lot worse off than the people want to think. And restoration of the relationship will require a lot more than Judah might hope.

Isaiah opens his message by calling defendant Judah into the courtroom of God. He steps up to the lectern, calls all of creation as his witness, and begins prosecuting God's case: ²Hear, heavens! Listen, earth! For the LORD has spoken: "I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me.³ The ox knows its master, the donkey its owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand...⁵ Why should you be beaten anymore? Why do you persist in rebellion? Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted.⁶ From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness—only wounds and welts and open sores..." At least oxen know where to go for food. Even donkeys know not to bite the farmhand. But Judah has less sense than barnyard animals. The children of the Holy One have lost touch with their God.

Not only is Judah unaware of God; Judah's sin has spiraled out of control. God speaks in the anguished voice of the parent pleading with a child in a destructive pattern: "Look how beat up you are by all this," God says. "There's no place left for more hurt. Don't you want to heal?" True, Judah can talk the religious talk. Technically the people are carrying out the God-directed obligations of temple worship. But God says he isn't having any of it. He wants no part of their celebrations. He wants no more pretentious offerings. God will hide his eyes and stop his ears and refuse to listen to their prayers (v. 14-15).

Because the deeper problem is that the relationship between God and his people is bent, almost beyond repair. Isaiah levels a torrent of accusations in so many ways it makes their heads spin. The people are about as bad off as they could possibly be. There is no way to "sacrifice and festival" their way out of this one. In the most pointed commands of the passage, Isaiah calls Judah to come back from the brink: "Wash! Make yourselves clean! Remove your evil deeds from before me. Stop doing wrong. Learn to do right. Seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless. Plead the case of the widow."

God's people must see the truth. Clean hands and pure hearts before God are essential. Acting in love to bring justice to those on the margins of society is critical. Worship practices alone just won't cut it. So God the judge calls defendant Judah into his chambers. He's drafted up a settlement, a way to straighten out the relationship: "Come now, let us settle the matter," God says in Isaiah 1:18, "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.¹⁹ If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good things of the land; but if you resist and rebel, you're going to be eaten by the sword." God offers the people a way forward. "Give me a sign," God says to Judah. "Give me a sign that your heart is turning toward me. Show me that you choose me, that you choose life. And your sin-stained life will be clean as snow." When sin-stained Judah comes into worship as if she has nothing to repent for, nothing amiss, God calls her worship a charade.

Sometimes I want to underplay the concrete reality of sin in my life. What about you? The Heidelberg Catechism tells us that "God is terribly angry with the sin we are born with, as well as the sins we personally commit." That's frightening. So as people who take sin seriously, something deserving God's wrath, sometimes we want to pretend it isn't really there. Sometimes if we've grown up in church, we become so adept at wallpapering over certain kinds of sin we forget it's still under there.

We'll generally admit that we're sinners in need of a savior, but press us to see the effects of a particular character flaw? Hold up a mirror to a damaging behavioral pattern, personally or communally? Like Adam and Eve, we might just run for cover, shift blame, or deny.

Others of us face an opposite danger. We respect God's righteous indignation so much it almost crushes us. We see the effects of poor decisions, see how stuck we are in ingrained patterns. We think we are beyond repair, beyond the reach of grace. We don't dare lift up our heads and hope God could love us. But do you hear in Isaiah 1 not only the blasts of righteous anger, but also the minor tones of a parent's grief? God is angry because sin offends his holiness; he is grieved because sin unravels the fabric of a relationship he longs to make whole.

How does he do that? Our companion passage for this morning are well known words from Isaiah 53: "Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted.⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." Do you hear the utter surprise in Isaiah's words? *Surely He* was pierced for *our* transgressions? By *his* wounds *we* are healed? The Lord has laid *on him* our wickedness?

Surely NOT. That doesn't make any sense. Israel's legal code, given by God at Mt. Sinai, said that where financial redress for injury was impossible, the punishment for a crime was dealt to the one who did the injuring. An eye for an eye, a wound for a wound, a bruise for a bruise. (Ex. 21:24). To think of someone else bearing the wound justly deserved by another was surprising.

Those who first heard Isaiah's message probably could not imagine that centuries later there would be a fully human, fully divine sacrifice whose wounds would bring healing. It's unlikely they had a well-developed theology of Christ's atonement 700 years before Jesus. So they probably had lots of questions about who fit the description of such a servant. That the servant would, and *could*, straighten out others' sins is unexpected. As Christians today, we have both the benefit of hindsight and the challenge of hearing the surprise of these verses. If you're a baroque music fan, you probably immediately hear Isaiah's words sung in the minor notes of Handel's chorus from *The Messiah*.

Or maybe you hear 1 Peter 2:24, where Peter is talking about Jesus:²⁴ "He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed." As believers in Jesus, we look back and say, "Of course! Of course Isaiah's words are about Jesus. Of course we read them in Advent as we await a savior who straightens out our sin."

Jesus' wounds. Jesus' bruises. Jesus' pierced hands and side. Jesus' alienation-voluntarily endured to make us whole. Jesus' suffering shows us both how seriously God takes our sin; and how deeply he loves us. We begin to see the depth of God's love when we begin to see the depth of our sin. We begin to see the

depth of our sin when we see its consequences in the face of God's own Son. We can't straighten out our sin ourselves.

So brothers and sisters, here's a freeing truth paraphrased from other pastors: We are more sinful than we know. And we are more loved than we can imagine.

One of the joys of serving as a workplace chaplain was walking with people on the slow road of coming to know Jesus in every dimension of their lives. One of the most beautiful things about that ministry was hearing admissions of flaws, the honest acknowledgement of faults. There was the husband-to-be who recognized how gracious his fiancé was toward him. He was a bit rough around the edges, but he certainly saw some aspects of his personality and behavior that could make him hard to love. He could name to a few other souls some of his shortcomings. When we acknowledge the truth about ourselves out loud, we make room for God to begin to deal with our sin.

Surely Jesus comes alongside. Surely Jesus bends down and looks us in the eyes. Surely he lifts heads hung down in shame. And he says, "That destructive cycle you can't get out of? That wound you can't heal? I see it. It's deadly. But here. I love you. I'm willing to take the consequences for that myself. I have a better life for you."

Jesus lifts up the weight of our sin. As we allow him to take our burdens, the strangest thing happens. His head bows down. Our heads rise up. His shoulders bend; ours straighten. He holds the load so that we can stand tall. We look up at our Judge's face and see our Savior.

What if, in the family of Jesus, there was no need to pretend about our brokenness? What if we each had a small handful of trustworthy people who could hear our brokenness and our failures, help us turn our faces toward grace, and walk with us as we stumbled toward new life? I know some of us have that here at LaGrave. I long for it for all of us.

What if church was a place where we said to one another, "My name is Kristy. My life is weighed down by sin more than I know. Here are some of the ways I can see it. And I know that both you and Jesus love me more than I can imagine. Help me make straight paths for him in my life." That's possible for us, because when Jesus comes to straighten out our sin, he doesn't just come to "set us straight;" to tell us to "straighten up" or get our acts together. He comes to call us to new life set right by grace.

In a few weeks we'll stand on tiptoe at the manger. And we'll worship the newborn king. But don't let his smallness fool you. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. We gladly welcome him to make his home in us. Come, Lord Jesus.

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