

**Sermon Preached by the Reverend Cameron J. Soulis, Associate Rector
at Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
on Good Friday, Year B
March 29, 2024**

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I was in college, I chose to take an introductory art history course to fulfill my distribution requirements. The professor was known to be a good teacher, and I was interested to learn more about the artwork we would discuss. I was introduced to many paintings and sculptures, primarily European, that I had never seen or heard of previously. One artwork that I remember specifically learning about is the Eisenheim altarpiece. I remember it because it contains a particularly striking image of the crucifixion. Jesus is portrayed on the cross at the moment of his death. The painter made Jesus' agony and suffering plain for all to see. Jesus is shown with particularly robust marks and wounds that indicate what he had endured through the trial and crucifixion. His skin is filled with wooden splinters of all sizes. The crown of thorns on his head is especially vicious. His limbs are twisted and elongated to emphasize the brutality of hanging on the cross. This painting is memorable for its portrayal of the crucifixion that emphasizes the torment Jesus endured.

The other reason that this artwork remains in my mind these many years later is the story behind it. The altarpiece, painted by Matthew Grunewald between 1512 and 1516, was commissioned for and hung in the chapel of a hospital, which specialized in patients with terrible and very painful skin diseases. These patients found solace in the chapel, since there was, of course, little doctors could do at the time to relieve or heal their suffering. Grunewald composed this particular image of the crucifixion with those patients who would be praying in front of it in his mind. He wanted to remind them that they were not alone in their suffering, that Jesus, too, had suffered terribly and understood their misery and pain, that Jesus, too, had been disfigured and difficult to look at. Grunewald would have prayed with a number of scriptures as he prepared this painting, and it is very likely that one of those on which he meditated was the passage from Isaiah, which we heard today.

That passage is a count of a servant whose appearance was marred beyond human semblance, could easily describe the Jesus depicted by Grunewald on this older piece. As you might know, today's reading from Isaiah is one of four passages in the book of Isaiah known as the servant songs. These four texts, written in poetic form, tell about God's chosen servant. They describe the role and character of the servant. Although they are spread across about ten chapters in the middle part of the book of Isaiah, these four texts are connected by their similar content. As well, they were all written during the time when the people of Israel were exiled in Babylon. You'll notice that the servant is not identified in the song that we read.

And that is true of the other three servant songs as well. It is not clear who Isaiah considered the servant to be. Of course, scholars have different theories about this. Some think that Isaiah had a particular historical person in mind. Others believe instead that the servant refers to the community of Israel. And from very early on, Christian tradition has considered the servant in these songs to be Jesus. Although we cannot know for sure who Isaiah meant when writing about God's chosen servant, his poems were an important comfort to the Judean exiles suffering under Babylonian exile and offered them a vision of God's love despite their difficulties. Let's look a little more closely at the particular servant song appointed for today.

The poem begins by stating that God's servant shall prosper, that God's servant shall be exalted and lifted up. It then goes on to describe this servant. But unlike someone humans might consider worth exalting, God's servant has no form or majesty that we should look at him. He is one from whom others hide their faces. He has an appearance so marred beyond human semblance that he startles many nations. Not only is the servant one who is undesirable, he is also undemanding and non-protesting. Twice, the poem says, he did not open his mouth. Someone like this is the very opposite of whom we humans might choose to acclaim, particularly in our current time and culture. We arguably live in a time that is intensely image-driven, a time when one can be tempted to focus solely on appearances, a time when many attend to their own self-glorification.

John, in his gospel, similarly offers an understanding of exaltation that runs counter to our cultural tendencies. Throughout this gospel, Jesus speaks of being glorified. Now, the disciples and those listening to Jesus probably thought he meant he would be glorified in the way humans typically are, that Jesus would be lifted up in esteem and praise with his lordship being recognized by everyone in the world. But Jesus, in John's gospel, was talking about being glorified through being lifted on the cross.

Paradoxically, it was by laying aside his power and yielding to suffering, pain, humiliation, and loss that Jesus was glorified. These scriptures offer us a counter vision of glorification. They stand in opposition to our current moment where image is everything and many are tempted by self-glorifying power. They remind us that God does not see in the way that mortals see. Good Friday invites us to stand firm against those values and forces that we might feel pushed toward by our culture. It invites us to look upon that which is not attractive and not desirable. To consider more than appearance, to go deeper than surface level. It invites us to remember that in God, power comes from weakness.