

Welcome

As a pastor, one of the things that irritates me the most about faith is platitudes. When someone is experiencing a difficult time, we throw out something like, “Everything happens for a reason.” Or “God has a plan.”

It’s not that they’re *wrong*. I mean, God *does* have a plan. And technically, everything *does* happen for a reason. We live in a universe of causality. So that’s like saying, “Water is wet.” Yes, true. Thank you for your contribution.

No, I hate these platitudes because they’re designed to offer the appearance of comfort without the presence of comfort. If I’m saying a platitude, it’s usually because don’t want to be bothered by your pain, but I also don’t want to appear uncaring. So I say something that looks like I’m engaged with you.

But deep down, I know I’m not. I’m just trying to get out of this uncomfortable conversation. And *you* know I’m really not.

Religious platitudes is a micro-example of what Karl Marx was talking about when he famously observed that religion is the ‘opiate of the masses’. Marx was critiquing how religion - particularly Christianity - in Europe had become a tool of oppression.

Despite massive gaps between the wealthy and the poor, and the fact that there were exponentially more poor, they didn’t rebel. The poor remained passive, allowing themselves to be exploited for the gain of the super-wealthy.

Why? Because the Christianity they were being taught promised them a platitude: be faithful (which meant ‘keep your head down, don’t complain or cause problems’) and you’ll get to go to heaven when you die. Suffer now for reward later.

Of course, that didn’t apply to the bosses, politicians and CEOs. Which was Marx’ point. They used religion to drug the regular folks into passivity. Rather than liberating good news, Christianity became a tool of oppression.

It’s the same tactic American slavers used to keep enslaved people passive. They edited Bibles to leave out the Exodus story - about God freeing God’s people from enslavement, and only let enslaved preachers preach verses about slaves obeying masters. No wonder enslaved Americans wrote songs about God’s chariot swinging low, or that day by and by when they could fly away.

I hope that, like me, even thinking about the Bible being weaponized like that is infuriating and heartbreaking.

And while telling an enslaved person that God wants them to obey their slaver is much worse than telling a grieving friend that God has a plan, they're the same kind of move: the person speaking is using faith to distance themselves from the person suffering.

This sort of theologically fueled detachment from suffering is Antichrist. Literally - it's the opposite of what Jesus does.

So today, I want to explore with you what a faith that engages suffering looks like. From individual grief to systemic injustices, how does God call us to a ministry of presence and faithful solidarity with those who are suffering?

Message

We're in the season of Epiphany, a season when we ask what it means that Jesus is for the whole world. We are Jesus' church, but Jesus isn't just for us. He's for the whole world. So what's our role in Jesus' mission?

This year, our series is called Spark! We're exploring the ways Jesus ignites our calling. What does it take to be the Church Jesus calls us to be?

It might seem counterintuitive, but to answer those questions, we're going to be spending time with the prophets of the Hebrew Bible for this series. Men who lived out God's calling among God's people.

Because the God who created and cared for this special people thousands of years ago is the same God who arrived in the person of Jesus that first Christmas, and is the same God who gathered us for worship today!

Over the last two weeks, we've met Isaiah's Servant, who showed us that God calls us to be faithful, not effective.

Today, I want to explore how our faith is public. When we talk about public life, we're talking about politics. How do we live together? What is just, fair and true? These are questions that cultures across the world and throughout time have answered in various ways. In our country today, we have all sorts of competing philosophies, with Democrats and Republicans answering those questions differently. But so do libertarians and leftists, capitalists and socialists.

What's strange is that there's a general sense in our culture that *religion* shouldn't have a say in the public square, that religion should be something private and individual.

Now, there's a sense in which that's really important. We inherited our governing and economic systems from Europe, where religion controlled them, and those systems became incredibly oppressive.

And we've certainly seen how politicians in our country have exploited religion to marshal support for all kinds of nefarious policies.

But I hope we'll see today in the call of Isaiah that the abuse of religion in public life doesn't mean that religion should be relegated to a private life. In fact, that may be the deep problem. What we need is a vision for faith that is robustly public, unapologetically political and aimed square at those the system marginalizes.

In other words, a Church that never says, "Just be patient and wait your turn," from a position of power and privilege. Rather, a church that sacrifices our power for the sake of the vulnerable who we've learned to call our siblings.

Turn with us to [Isaiah 9](#).

The last two weeks, we've been in Second Isaiah, written by students of the prophet hundreds of years after his ministry. Today, we're back with the original prophet. He lived in an absolutely *feral* time, y'all. The Ancient Near East had been living under the thumb of the Assyrian Empire. But now an Assyrian Civil War had weakened the Empire, and the surrounding nations saw a chance to pounce. Israel (to the north) and Judah (to the south) were trading allies with Assyria, so the turmoil hurt them badly. The other nations who wanted to take Assyria down came after Israel and Judah, too.

After Israel's longtime king Jeroboam II died, Israel fell into political turmoil, and that anti-Assyrian faction, led by Damascus, conquered them. (This proved fatal for Israel - in about another decade, Assyria would conquer and destroy them completely.)

Most scholars think this passage was written in observance of the ascendance of King Hezekiah to the throne of Judah (the Southern kingdom). Hezekiah will prove to be an incredibly important king - he ranks right below king David. And you can imagine why this would be such good news, couldn't you? With so much instability and insecurity, a new king is terrific news.

Now, one final observation before we read this text: this has some pretty tricky Hebrew in it, and the first verse has a pretty big mistranslation that we'll need to clear up. First, let's read the verse as it is typically rendered:

Nevertheless, that time of darkness and despair will not go on forever. The land of Zebulun and Naphtali will be humbled, but there will be a time in the future when Galilee of the Gentiles, which lies along the road that runs between the Jordan and the sea, will be filled with glory. -- Isaiah 9:1 (NLT)

The way this text is rendered makes it sound like a prophecy about a far off, future king. But the way the pronouns are formed in Hebrew make it clear that the *time* is not what is former and later. Rather, it's referring back to the kings of the previous passage.

Here's a better translation:

Surely there will be no gloom on her [Jerusalem] for whom there has been anguish, like the time the former one [King Hadianu of Damascus] treated contemptibly the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali and the latter one [King Rezin of Damascus] treated harshly the Way of the Sea, Beyond the Jordan, and Galilee of the Nations.

Isaiah wants his listeners to understand that their situation is deeply political *and* deeply religious. What is happening around them matters to God, and God has a particular vision for their flourishing.

What *is* that vision? Let's keep reading:

The people who walk in darkness will see a great light.
For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine.

You will enlarge the nation of Israel, and its people will rejoice.
They will rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest and like warriors dividing the plunder.

For you will break the yoke of their slavery and lift the heavy burden from their shoulders.
You will break the oppressor's rod, just as you did when you destroyed the army of Midian.

The boots of the warrior and the uniforms bloodstained by war will all be burned.
They will be fuel for the fire. -- Isaiah 9:2–5 (NLT)

Now, the language of light and darkness is something we addressed back at Christmas - how in our racialized world, these images have been co-opted and used as weapons against people of color. More on that in a minute, but first, hear the promise God makes through Isaiah:

This king - Hezekiah - will bring an end to injustice. Specifically here it's for the oppressed and marginalized.

And, as we saw on Christmas Day, this is a text the early church saw as a promise about Jesus too. When the Church looked at Jesus, they saw a king who had come to rule as God intended. A king who made his home not among the powerful, but among the marginal.

So they said, this is a king who is a king like Hezekiah was. Just as God sent Hezekiah to end the oppression of Israel, so too God sent Jesus for the oppressed of our world today.

Song

When we say that Jesus came to the oppressed and marginalized of the world, this is not an idle statement (though I'm worried that we say it so often it's become cliché). But this is a political statement. Jesus' idea of the *polis*, the city - which means who's a citizen and who's not, who's in and who's out - was the inverse of the other leaders of his day. Jesus aligned himself with the outcasts - lepers, sinners, sex workers, people from the wrong side of the tracks. *Those* are the people among whom Jesus said the kingdom of God could be found.

Again, it's worth slowing down here: Jesus said *God's Kingdom* (which is a political entity - a kingdom!) is found among the people who had been rejected by the ruling kingdoms of the day. Jesus' kingdom is populated by the people who slipped - or have been pushed - through the cracks.

For James Cone, the founder of American Liberation theology, this meant that in our particular time and context, Jesus has come to Black and Indigenous peoples. In his landmark work, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, he rails against religion as an opiate, insisting that a faith made of platitudes is no faith at all.

“Without concrete signs of divine presence in the lives of the poor, the gospel becomes simply an opiate; rather than liberating the powerless from humiliation and suffering, the gospel becomes a drug that helps them adjust to this world by looking for ‘pie in the sky’.” — James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*

This is why Jesus' crucifixion is so important to understand. Cone says,

“We cannot find liberating joy in the cross by spiritualizing it, by taking away its message of justice in the midst of powerlessness, suffering, and death. The cross, as a locus of divine revelation, is not good news for the powerful, for those who are comfortable with the way things are, or for anyone whose understanding of religion is aligned with power.” — James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*

Cone found Jesus in the midst of Black suffering.

“Every time a white mob lynched a black person, they lynched Jesus. The lynching tree is the cross in America. When American Christians realize they can meet Jesus only in the crucified bodies in our midst, they will encounter the real scandal of the cross... Salvation is revealed in the cross of the condemned criminal Jesus, and humanity's salvation is available *only* through our solidarity with the crucified people in our midst.” — James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*

Any religion that disconnects us from the suffering of the marginalized is false religion. It's the opiate Marx warned against.

Catalyst, will we be a church that spouts platitudes? A Church that hides from the political realities of our day?

Or will we be a church that, like Isaiah, recognizes that Jesus has come into our world and come specifically to the marginalized? Will we look for him among those who have fewer advantages, fewer rights, fewer opportunities than the rest of us?

The sort of faith Jesus came to bring us is not a faith that drugs us into passivity. It's a faith that awakens and enlivens us. May we look to the margins to find such faith!

Communion + Examen

Where has God invited me to be awake to those on the margins in the last few weeks?

How have I been tempted to ignore those on the margins in the last weeks?

In the week ahead, how might I be tempted to ignore those on the margins?

How can I follow Jesus to the margins in this next week?

Assignment + Blessing