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Advent Devotional "Suffering Servant"

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Advent Devotional
December 5, 1998
SUFFERING SERVANT
Isaiah 53:1-6

Isaiah's words have a permanent place in my mind, worn smooth by countless repetitions. They accompany a picture of my minister father standing by the Communion Table at the front of the sanctuary in the Evergreen Baptist Church, the church which houses all my growing-up memories. As he stands there, the deacons walk the aisles serving the elements while he reads selected passages. This is one of them. And so the words have a special solemnity to them, their sound that of my father's voice and their cadence that of the King James Version.

From long acquaintance with that memory, to my mind these words have little to do with Christmas joy and all to do with crucifixion, suffering and Easter. We celebrate births and make them occasions of gaiety and rejoicing, none more so than that one which benchmarks our calendar. Isaiah's images evoke nothing celebratory.

Isaiah paints the Messiah as totally undesirable. The tender shoot is a "sucker" draining strength from the plant, making it awkward-looking and requiring pruning. A root out of dry ground produces a wizened, misshapen, often barren plant. Neither plant has a place in a garden, or even on one's property. Either could only emerge in public lands, where no one really cares.

Isaiah's human portrait is no better. He paints a sinister, slouching figure in silhouette, dark against a lighter background. When it turns to the light it reveals a deformed face and twisted body, the stuff of nightmares like Victor Hugo's Quasimodo or the

“boogyman” used to frighten children into obedience. Of course this “nonhuman” knows pain and is acquainted with sickness. Of course God would choose this worthless creature as a scapegoat rather than make beauty a sacrifice, to be hit, knocked down, afflicted, pierced, crushed, beaten, scourged. Or so we think.

The scapegoat, alluded to in this Servant Song, differed from all other sacrificial animals, whose blamelessness humans could discern. Those bringing and offering the sacrifice could see any blemish. Other offerings were likewise based on human observation—first-born or first-grown or first-harvested. The scapegoat was different, chosen by casting lots—which would mean chosen by God Himself. It was a case, as God told Samuel when David was selected, that God searches the heart while man cares about appearances. And so it is with the Servant and with babies.

Objectively, newborns are ugly and worthless. They are wizened—wrinkled and red. They are “suckers”—parasites draining life from hosts made awkward-looking by their presence, then emerging from their incubation hungry, helpless, and demanding, crying formlessly in protest and to get their way. They are misshapen, lacking any of the physical beauty often revealed in the human adult.

Objectively, newborns may be ugly and worthless. But as we gaze upon these “bundles of joy” we see beyond appearances. We see with God’s eyes, eyes of love that discern possibilities. The Child in the manger calls to us to use those same eyes as we look at all our fellow humans, to be true to the training in Godlikeness we gain each time we look at Him, each time we see a baby.

Ray Granada