the SUFFERING SERVANT
PREFACE

Holy Week is the week leading up to Easter, beginning with Palm Sunday and ending with Easter Sunday. The tradition of observing Holy Week began early in Christendom, when Christian pilgrims would travel to Jerusalem at Passover to reenact and participate in the events of the week leading up to Easter.

It is a week devoted to commemorating Jesus Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Palm Sunday), the Last Supper with His disciples (Maundy Thursday), His crucifixion (Good Friday) and His resurrection (Easter).

This has historically been a time of introspection, repentance and contemplation, an opportunity to embrace what it looks like to live out Christ’s suffering in our own lives, while looking forward to the joy of resurrection, both His and ours. It is this sentiment—death and new life—that is at the heart of Holy Week.

We pray this devotional, created by faculty, staff and friends of the Evangel family, will bless you.

*All scripture referenced in this devotional comes from the ESV translation.*
READ: ISAIAH 52:13; JOHN 12:27–36

We are in the crowd with John, listening to Jesus’ voice: “Now is my soul troubled.” Although we may not fully understand why He spoke these words, we are listening with our whole beings because we have known waves tossing our own souls. In that human utterance, Jesus is like us.

Just a breath before, He said with authority, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified,” and then spoke of a grain of wheat dying to bear fruit. How is this glorifying? This word meaning “to exalt” lifts one’s countenance. Yet Jesus speaks of death and a troubled soul. His words are like David’s: “My soul is greatly troubled” (Psalm 6:3). We can tell He is living these words in the deep well of His being. Speaking to Himself and us, He asks, “And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” We sense His resolve, that He has spoken stillness to the troubled waters, and they gather, moving forward by His will. He has spoken of glory again, and suddenly, His voice is echoed by one from above.

Jesus is not alone, and God is not silent. John claims the voice is from heaven: “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” We are stirred by the past and future of these words, spoken by the Father Jesus has just named. Naming is more than just sounding letters; it is the essence of identity, defining character and purpose. Later, we will remember this day and understand. Jesus’ strange paradox of death and glory were not only teaching. He lived this death, illumining the name of God.
I often tell my students that I love teaching the Old Testament because it makes sense to me that the God who revealed Himself as gracious, compassionate and forgiving, would become a human, live among us, teach us His ways, die for our sins, and rise from the dead to bring eternal life to us. Yet throughout history people have often rejected the Lord and even fought against Him. Isaiah 53:3 announces Jesus as one who “was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.” During His ministry Jesus was opposed for what He taught and rejected for who He was. When Jesus spoke in the synagogue at Nazareth, He announced the fulfillment of God’s promises to reach down and help the downtrodden. The people’s initial reaction was favorable, but when He pointed out God’s miracles for Gentiles in ancient times, the people tried to throw Him off a cliff (Luke 4:16-30, esp. verses 28-29)!

Jesus has sent us as His representatives to this world, and He wants us to tell them that God still offers good news to the poor (physically or spiritually), release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and freedom to the oppressed. Some will receive this message, just like some did back then. But if society rejects us when we proclaim His message, we are in good company—the Master Himself was rejected for that very message.
READ: ISAIAH 53:4A; MATTHEW 8:16–17

I was arriving for an important meeting with the general superintendent of a national church in Africa. He and his driver met me curbside as I came out of the terminal with my bags. I was expecting the driver to help me with my luggage. Instead, the elder leader greeted me and took up my bags and carried them to the waiting car. I was stunned. In his culture, things were carried by servants or by those with lower status as a sign of respect. But here he was carrying my bags!

The message was clear: I was his guest. He was taking full responsibility for me during my stay. He was the greater but he was serving the lesser as a way of communicating his desire to see to my needs while I was in his care and under his authority. His authority only increased with his display of humility.

Shouldn’t I be stunned by the fact that Jesus became the Suffering Servant for me? When He comes to meet me at my point of need, He stoops low and takes up the worst parts of my human existence. He carries my weaknesses and my diseases—things I am powerless to carry in my own strength. He is infinitely greater, yet our relationship is based on Him taking responsibility for my burdens and pain.

Matthew 8:16-17 reveals that the Lord’s casting out demons and healing diseases fulfilled the prophecy in Isaiah 53:4a, “Surely, he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.” Jesus’ earthly ministry was a forerunner to His work on the Cross. It is there, on the Cross, that He carried my painful baggage and served me by dying in my place. He took full responsibility for my sin, my weaknesses, my diseases and my sorrows. I am stunned by the Suffering Servant—the Son of God!
THE WOUNDED CRIMINAL

BY STARLA GOOCH—Coordinator of Student Ministries and Discipleship

READ: ISAIAH 53:5, JOHN 19:31-37

There I sat at the bottom of our family stairwell, eyes fixed on a timer, awaiting the screeching ring that would end my time of suffering. I was three years old and imprisoned in time-out for stealing a container of Tic-Tacs. Shame ravaged me. Perhaps this was the first time I felt the wounding of a fallen world, deeply tarnished from God's original design. Yet somehow, it was not the outside wounds that marred me; my afflictions came from the selfish soul within.

Throughout the years, like every other human on our planet, I have gathered more and more wounds. Some have come from the hands, words or neglect of others, but the most incognito wounds were self-inflicted: my hidden secrets and deepest shames.

When God implemented His plan to heal the wounds of humanity, many could not receive Him; for Jesus assumed the most shameful position by choosing to die as a criminal. Hanging on an erected cross was so lowly that even a criminal by Jesus' side derided him. Indeed, even His most loyal disciples rejected this Jesus. So what makes Jesus so hard to accept, let alone love? As Stanley Hauerwas describes, “We would prefer a savior not wounded, not wanting our own wounds exposed.”

Following Jesus requires each of us to expose the truth about ourselves to the world, that each of us is a wounded criminal. Our hands and tongues drip with the assaults we have forged on others, and our hearts boil inside with secret injuries. But when we choose the path of courage to assume the same posture of Christ, intentionally exposing our shame, then we can begin to heal. Only through the broken embrace of His piercing, crushing and chastisements can the Suffering Servant make us whole.
SILENT BEFORE HIS ACCUSERS

BY AUDREY ADKINS—Advancement and Annual Fund Associate

READ: ISAIAH 53:7; MATTHEW 27:11–14

For most of us, our sense of justice is strong. When someone is accused of having committed a crime, we expect them to be tried. If they are found guilty, we expect that their sentence will be of a similar severity to the crime. And usually, when we are being accused of a wrongdoing, our sense of justice is elevated—particularly if we did not commit the wrongdoing in question.

Yet in this passage in Isaiah, we read, “he opened not his mouth.” Jesus knew that He was innocent. After all, He’s the Son of God—all-knowing, all-seeing.

Pilate also knew that Christ was innocent (John 18:28-38). Referencing the accusations that were coming against Jesus by the chief priests and elders, Pilate asks Him, “Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?” But Jesus, knowing His innocence, remains silent before His accusers (Matthew 27:14).

His was an all-knowing silence. He knew more than His innocence. He knew the greatness and depth of our need of a Savior. He knew that the only way was forward—to Golgotha, to the depth of a grave not His own (Isaiah 53:9a). And so He was silent for us, for our salvation. Just as the governor was greatly amazed at His silence, so we too, should be greatly amazed at His silence on our behalf.
The man who said, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head,” (Luke 9:58) did not own a burial plot at the time of His death. In Jesus’ day the common people were buried in “trench graves.” Since Jesus died late in the afternoon, just before the beginning of the Sabbath at sundown, there was no time to dig a grave for Him. Instead, a rich follower named Joseph of Arimathea begged Pilate for the body of Jesus and laid Him in his own family tomb.

Since Joseph was a rich man, he owned a new tomb freshly cut from the limestone bedrock upon which the city of Jerusalem was situated. According to the customs of the day, the dead would be wrapped in cloths with aromatic spices inserted into the folds and then laid on a shelf inside the tomb. At some later date, when the body had decayed sufficiently, the bones of the dead were gathered up and placed in a small stone box called an ossuary or “bone box.” Often the name of the deceased would be inscribed on the outside of the box.

Gathering the bones and depositing them into the ossuary was typically the duty of the eldest son. It was a service of love on behalf of the deceased. No doubt Joseph of Arimathea thought that he would one day perform this service for Jesus since He died childless. Little did he know that Jesus would not be needing an ossuary. He would only be borrowing the tomb from Friday to Sunday.

A few years ago a documentary film-maker claimed to have found an ossuary with an inscription reading Yeshua bar Yosef, “Jesus son of Joseph.” Scholars have rejected the notion that this is the ossuary of Jesus of Nazareth. However, the greatest refutation of such a claim is Easter. Yes, He once lay in a borrowed tomb, but it was not His tomb! He is risen!
READ: ISAIAH 53:9B; JOHN 18:28–40

How quick we are to assign responsibility for our misdeeds to another! The Jews speaking in John 18:31 have been pressing the Romans to stop Jesus. Their logic in the face of Pilate’s questions is that Jesus is already a criminal or they would not have bothered him. So Pilate hands Jesus back and says, “Finish the job.” Instead, they claim they cannot because of the Law. The rules say we must behave a certain way. It’s not our responsibility.

Meanwhile, an innocent man is shoved into the maw of the Roman government and, on the other end, is thrown unceremoniously into a grave with the “wicked” and the “rich”—not the good and the memorable, or the upright and the righteous, but the wicked and the rich. But Isaiah (Isaiah 53:9) highlights the contrast between those he shares a grave with and the man himself: some translations say “but,” some say “although,” and some say “because.” Because He had done no wrong, He was treated with disdain and disrespect. Because He had spoken no lies, the authorities wanted to be rid of Him. Because He had never done evil, His elimination was necessary.

Humans may stand on either side of this equation. Some of us have condemned the innocent, because their purity challenged our comfort. Some have bypassed the normal procedures of investigation to accomplish an agenda that benefits our political viewpoint. Some have shoved the responsibility for proof onto someone else to maintain an illusion of inevitability. On the other hand, the falsely accused—the innocent—have watched the slow progress of human perversity destroy the truth and condemn them to the company of failures and outcasts. Jesus sees in this moment the accuser and the condemned. He suffers false accusation, torture and abandonment, not only for the falsely accused, tortured and abandoned, but also for the accuser, the torturer and the deserter.
Easter is a season of joy and thanksgiving. In Easter we rejoice that God has redeemed us from sin and death, that he has given us new life through His Spirit and in the promise of eternal life with Him. Yet there is always the danger that we would forget or ignore the price of our joy. Our salvation from death came through nothing less than God dying in our place.

We don’t often speak or think in such stark terms as we find in this verse of Isaiah. We often struggle to face the harsh reality that the Father sent the Son to die the death of a criminal, mocked and scorned by the world, and that Jesus embraced the way of the cross to bring life to the world. But the message of Isaiah 53 is that God’s servant will bring life to His people, not through the usual paths of strength and power, but through the way of suffering, mockery and death.

The mystery of Easter is that God has given the gift of infinite life through embracing death for our sake. And so the joy of Easter is a costly joy that ought to lead us all the more to thanksgiving and praise for the depths to which God came in love for us.
Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted. As many were astonished at you—his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind—so shall he sprinkle many nations. Kings shall shut their mouths because of him, for that which has not been told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand.

Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.