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The God We Never Expected Isaiah 53:1-11a

Let's begin with a question: What can we *expect* of God—what is God like and what kinds of things does God *do*? Since *illusions* about God are the seedbed of disillusion about God, the question about what we expect matters a great deal. For most of my life I've been listening to people talk about the God they believe in, and I've heard lots of people tell me about the God they *don't* believe in. Some people's expectations about who God is and what God is likely to do have more biblical support and some less—and some have no support in the Bible at all. But, in any event, here's a list of what I've heard and read over my lifetime.

Most people expect that God is powerful. Christians tend to like this expectation of God. God says, "Let there be light" and—*zap!*—there is light. Elijah asks God to send down fire to burn up the sacrifice on Mount Carmel, and God sends a fire that not only burns up the sacrifice, but the altar itself. Jesus tells a storm on the Sea of Galilee to knock it off, and the wind stops and the waves calm down. Jesus says to cripple, "take up your bed and walk," and immediately the man is healed and picks up his bed and walks. Jesus is killed on Friday and raised from the dead on Sunday. We like this about God! All of this is biblical, and we at Chapel Hill believe and teach without hesitation that all of it really happened in the same world where $e=mc^2$ and the universe is 13.7 billion years old. When a God that powerful also loves us, we tend expect to get what we want and need.

A mostly-biblical but incomplete expectation is that God is holy, just and wrathful and cannot allow sin to go unpunished. Although this view of God has fallen out of style with many Christians and most unbelievers in the western hemisphere, there is something in all of us that wants God to be good and just, don't you think? Two of my grandchildren are 7 and two are 10, and every one of them expects fairness and justice: "She got 7 and I only got 5!" "No, when you jump rope, you have to wait your *turn*; you can't just cut in line." On a bigger scale, there is something in each of us that wants to know that people who do terrible things will be held accountable. Of course, we tend to want justice for those who've wronged us and mercy for ourselves.

God the shrink—the psychotherapist—is popular with many. There's really no such thing as sin with this God: some of us aren't very well-adjusted so we do things *others* judge us for, but not God. God understands that we're victims or that we didn't get the parenting we needed. Some people can be sure that what we can expect from God is that he is like an old-fashioned Rogerian therapist: never-failing

in unconditional, empathic acceptance—he always accepts us no matter what we do, and God saves us by helping us become self-actualized and well-adjusted.

Most of the Founding Fathers of our nation were Deists and so are some people today. Deists expect God the Creator to be like a cosmic watchmaker who made the universe, wound it up and said, “There you go: good luck, you’re on your own now. I’m here in heaven, not mucking about there on earth doing anything that actually matters.” We can expect that, but no more, so there’s no sense getting our hopes up and no sense in getting mad at God when he doesn’t come through for us.

Probably the most common set of expectations about who God is and what God does is what I enjoy calling “The Great Mush God of Civil Religion.” Ideas about this God are *highly* flexible, but in general, this is a friendly, pleasant God whose job is to take care of me, make me successful, healthy and happy... did I mention rich?... especially if I follow his principles for success (at least sort of); God helps me be good, and takes me to heaven when I die where I will see all my friends and loved ones, but not Hitler, and where he will make all of *my* dreams come true at last. When this God doesn’t come through for me—like when someone I love dies, or suffers with a dread disease, or I lose my job—I have every reason to be angry and feel betrayed, because when he lets bad things happen to good people, he’s failing to keep his end of the bargain. What *my* end of the bargain might be isn’t entirely clear, but it’s not about know and loving God, it’s mostly transactional—like putting a buck in a vending machine and getting a candy bar out—I deposit some good behavior and in exchange God gives me what I want. Not a bad deal.

Now, the question is, what’s wrong with all of these explanations and expectations of God—even the ones with biblical support? The answer is that none of them take into account something about God we never expected. Something even Jesus’ closest disciples didn’t expect—not the men or the women. Here’s a clue to it, and then we’ll read our scripture for this morning.

When Jesus asked his disciples “Who do *you* say I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” And Jesus said, “Attaboy Peter! Flesh and blood didn’t reveal that to you, my Father in heaven did.” Now, who remembers what comes next in the story? Don’t feel bad if you don’t know: almost nobody remembers what comes next. Immediately after Peter gave the right answer about Jesus being God’s Son, the Messiah, Jesus explained that he must go to Jerusalem, suffer many things, be rejected by the religious leaders, and be killed, and after three days rise again. But that is NOT what anyone expected the Messiah to do. So, Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. Think of that word “rebuke.” It’s what you do with a child who asks where babies come from in front of the dinner guests: poor Jesus was apparently confused about what it means to be the Messiah. So instead of embarrassing him in front of everyone, Peter thoughtfully took Jesus aside and quietly explained to him what everybody knew: the Messiah doesn’t suffer and die; he defeats the bad guys, feeds the poor, fixes things and sets up a kingdom. Golly, Jesus, *everybody* knows that.

Our scripture passage this morning is Isaiah 53. This passage is quoted more frequently in the New Testament than any other Old Testament passage. Here's why: no one expected the Messiah to suffer, and no one expects a God who suffers. But Jesus suffered and died, and after he was raised from the dead, he had to help his followers understand why that had happened—indeed why it *had* to happen. Jesus explained his suffering by referring to the Bible—and the Bible he had was the Old Testament. There is no question that one of the passages Jesus used to help explain his suffering was this one. Listen. And think about who God is and what it means for us and for everybody.

Read Isaiah 53: 1-11a

I'm going to cut to the chase: What nobody ever expected is a God who suffers. Jesus' disciples didn't expect that: when he suffered and died their hopes were dashed and they were sure he couldn't be God's Son the Messiah. Jews didn't expect a God who suffers: Jesus' death was a scandal to them and is to most of western civilization to this day. Greeks certainly did not expect that: they were confident about their ideas of perfection—a perfect God doesn't suffer!—and Jesus' death on the cross was utter foolishness to them. Romans didn't expect that: Jesus' death was simply an indication about who had the power that actually mattered in this world. Almost nobody ever, anywhere, expected that the suffering of Jesus would tell us what we most need to know about some of the things we most need to know about; things that are hardest to understand: sin, suffering, powerful worldly powers, who God is and what God does, how people get reconciled and redeemed, and what to expect of life in God's world for you and me and everyone.

Jesus' death on the cross tells us something about each of those things. Something we'd never have expected. Please take a moment and think about this: As Jesus is dying on the cross, what do we learn about these big issues that matter so much?

First, we learn that sin is very serious. Sin is not a matter of "Oh, well, you know, we all make mistakes. Everybody goofs up sometime." How serious is sin? Jesus was nailed to the cross and suffered and died an ugly death. That's how serious sin is. Why? Was it really mostly because God has rules and if you break them you've got to pay for it? Listen, God's rules matter, but it's not about broken rules... it's about broken hearts and lives. Most of us know a saying that goes something like, "You hurt me, well I can handle it. You hurt my kids, and you're dealing with *momma bear!*" The God who loves you also loves other people. And when we hurt someone else, we're damaging someone precious to God, someone for whom Jesus died. That breaks God's heart. William Barclay, the great Bible commentator, asks us to imagine driving down a residential street and exceeding the speed limit because we're running late for a doctor's appointment. Suddenly a child rushes out from between parked cars chasing a ball, and we strike the child and are horrified when it dies. Now, suppose that the police come and arrest us for breaking the speed limit, and we are found guilty of manslaughter by a jury. We're sentenced to pay a big fine and to go to prison for ten years. When we've paid the money and

served our time, is everything now right between us and the parents, between us and the child who is gone? No. The child's life is over, and the parents' lives are changed forever—the future they had expected never came to be. How does paying a fine and going to prison fix that? The core issue of sin is not so much the breaking of laws, it's the breaking of hearts and damaging lives and people. Sin is very serious, and while God's law is also serious, the real issue of sin cannot be reduced to broken laws. God is more than a rule-obsessed tyrant. God is a loving parent. He wants us to love each other because we love him. But if we won't, we ought to remember that it isn't good to mess with God or those whom God loves.

As Jesus suffers and dies, we learn that suffering is real; very, very real indeed. We'd like to pretend that it's not, we do everything we can to avoid suffering—and while only masochists like suffering, the question is whether we are meant to avoid all suffering. God's answer is, "No." I'd like you to hear from a friend who made a trip to India recently and hear about her experience with suffering. Beth Burgess:

BETH: Good morning! Last month I had the opportunity to travel to India and visit with a group called Catalyst; which is working with kids in the slums. Everything about India was overwhelming to me. The sights the smells, the sounds were all foreign, and everything in me recoiled: my stomach, my mind, my body... my spirit. As we toured the slums, I found myself face to face with suffering – real suffering, unlike anything I had ever seen before. We saw trash everywhere, with families picking through it, and cows eating it. At one slum I looked up a dirt hillside and saw stray dogs roaming around, a goat eating trash, and an elderly man lying in the sun and dirt. My heart stopped, and I thought "Oh my gosh, could this man have died and no one even noticed?" I could help but ask, "Where is God in all of this?"

As we drove through the city from one slum to the next, we saw children begging for food, knowing from our hosts that adults nearby were going to take anything that the children got. The sights and sounds of (make the sound on the podium) children with babies on their hips, knocking on the windows of our car begging for food is something I won't soon forget. That night as we tried to sleep, questions without answers flooded my mind. "Why would God allow such suffering?" "Where are you God in this?" "Where is there Hope?"

The next morning at breakfast the tears came. I was ashamed because most of the night I was wrestling with God knowing that I wanted nothing to do with this trip anymore. I wanted to get back to Gig Harbor, to my family, and my community. I wanted to leave, not really wanting to embrace the pain of seeing suffering. Everything in me wanted to push against what Philippians 3:10 says, "the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings..."

But God is good and He is gracious, and over the next 10 days in India He began to reveal to me where He *is* at work, where He *hasn't* forgotten His

beloved, and where there *is* hope! He also revealed to me that it is a privilege to participate in His suffering here on earth. So we began to embrace the opportunities to participate in His suffering. One way was instead of looking away as those children begged we began to place our hands on the windows, looked them in the eyes, and began praying for them. We are unwilling to not see the suffering anymore...

Thank you, Beth. That was my experience in India and Malawi and other countries.

Another thing we learn as Jesus dies on the cross is that worldly powers are POWERFUL and can do terrible things—to people, to whole nations, and even to God. Muammar Gadhafi has killed hundreds of his own people, including children, in order to hang onto his power and wealth. Pol Pot killed millions in Cambodia, including every person who wore glasses—because people with glasses were able to read and therefore potentially able to lead a rebellion against him. Adolf Hitler killed 6 million Jews and millions more Gypsies, gays and others. And, let's be clear: Hitler was able to do that because ordinary citizens made sure the trains ran on time, including to Auschwitz, where bureaucrats and citizens made sure the ovens were also run efficiently. And Pontius Pilate had his soldiers put Jesus to death not because he hated Jesus and not because he believed Jesus had done anything to deserve it, but mostly because he was a bureaucrat, and he simply did what was least likely to cause him trouble. On the cross it's as though God said to all the worldly powers, and all the demonic powers of evil, "Okay, go ahead. Do your worst. Drive the nails in my hands, laugh at me, say Jesus of Nazareth isn't my Son or your Savior. Bury me. Do your worst. And we shall see." In the end, God in Christ Jesus will have the last word. And it will be a word of life and love and salvation. But it comes at the far side of suffering. And worldly powers are only defeated through suffering of some kind.

As Jesus dies on the cross we learn some things we would never have expected about who God is. God is powerful, loving. God saves. God forgives and redeems. But what nobody expects is that God is a God who suffers. Ellie Wiesel in his book, *Night*, tells us that one day in the concentration camp all the prisoners were lined up to watch a man being hung for a minor infraction. As he died, one prisoner said, "Where is God [while this is happening]?" It's a legitimate question. Another man pointed and said, "He is there [dying on the gallows]." Is that so, do you think? Is there anything satisfying about that answer? Part of me would like God's answer to that kind of horrific injustice to be a lightning bolt that burns up the wicked. I can explain why free will and God's desire that we love him freely and not like robots are part of the answer to suffering and injustice. But what nobody expects is that part of God's answer to suffering is that God suffers with those who suffer—God shares in the suffering. When children are killed in war, when black men were lynched by a mob, when gays are bullied, when a loved one suffers with cancer or Alzheimer's, when tornados and tsunamis sweep whole towns away, when death comes too soon or not soon enough, God suffers. No one has to tell God what suffering is like—God's been there in the only Son. Jesus suffered injustice, was

betrayed and abandoned by his closest friends, experienced the absence of his Heavenly Father. God knows what it's like to have his only son die unjustly. We tend to like the God who is powerful, but the Savior is also the God who suffers, and that is the only God who could get *me*, the only God who could save me. Have you ever asked yourself how it could possibly have happened that the American slaves came to love Jesus—the Jesus they learned of from white slaveholders in a slaveholder culture? Part of it was that they knew he had shared their suffering—like them, he had been under the lash, he was despised and rejected, held to be of no account, nothing but a commodity to be bought and sold. Who could be their Savior but Jesus? Who could save the slave-holders in the South and the politicians and compromisers in the North except for Jesus?

Now, then, what is the connection between redemption/healing/forgiveness and suffering? The answer is this: all reconciliation, redemption, healing, forgiveness involves suffering. All doctors and psychologists and pastors know this, all first responders carry the suffering for a whole society as they rush into danger or pick up the broken remains of people after an accident. There is no forgiveness that comes without cost—no one... NO ONE... *deserves* forgiveness. It always comes as grace, at the cost of those who forgive. Isaiah says, "Surely he has born our grief and carried our sorrows, by his stripes we are healed, his punishment brought us peace." All reconciliation and healing involves suffering. Martin Luther King mobilized African Americans to change the racism and Jim Crow laws of this nation, and to call us to the best of our own deeply held values. And how did those who were oppressed by racism get our attention and change not only our laws but our hearts? By suffering: when America saw police dogs attacking peaceful marchers, and fire hoses blowing people off their feet, when poor women boycotted busses and walked to work for two years instead, when America saw the Birmingham miracle in which group after group of elementary-aged school children marched out of churches for hours, and were arrested and bussed off to incarceration; when Americans saw these things, even people who didn't like black folks knew that this was not what America was about.

And finally this. If God is a God who suffers, what does that suggest about living and loving in the real world in which Jesus is Lord and God is present? Is it really possible that we will avoid suffering? Will it help if we are really, really good? Or really, really careful? Maybe if we have enough insurance, or save enough money we can avoid suffering? Maybe if we're shrewd and hard enough? There is such a denial of suffering in our culture. I get it—who wants pain and hurt and loss? Was Jesus able to avoid suffering? If Jesus is our Lord, and he suffers, what does that tell us? Listen, God's word is clear: life and love have risk in them. Before there was any human sin, God took a risk when he made us. God didn't have to create anything at all—and it would have been safer if he had never made anything at all. Suffering is a part of life, beloved. If you don't want to risk suffering, don't have children—don't conceive them or adopt them: you can't know in advance what challenges they will be born with, develop or face, but you know they will face some suffering, and that means you will too. If you don't want to take risks, don't get

married, don't stay close to your family, don't have friends, and for crying out loud, never join a church! Ships in a harbor are safe, but that is not what ships are for. When God created Adam, he said, "It isn't good for the man to be alone." We weren't made for life alone. We are made for life together. And that means the risk of suffering. It comes with the territory, even for God, even when Jesus is Lord, even when you've been good, even though God is powerful, even though Jesus is raised from the dead.

Jesus said, "Anyone who seeks to save his life will lose it." Life is not to be found in safety. "But whoever loses his life for me and the Gospel will save it." So, don't hold onto life for dear life. Spend it! Live it. Go for it. You can do it because there is a God who knows you and loves you, who will share your suffering and sorrows when they come, who has paid the price for your forgiveness and peace, and who will have the last word about you. That's why firefighters run into burning buildings, Christians build homes in Mexico, and loved ones share the suffering and deaths of family members. Because Jesus is risen, because God is with us no matter what comes, have children, get married, love your friends, join a church. Take a chance and tell your neighbor or coworker about Jesus. Jesus suffered and died, but he is not dead, he is alive, and because he lives we ought to live too! The Lord is with you.

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Read the passage out loud.**

- **Reflect & Apply Individually:** Each person take 5-7 minutes to circle words or phrases that jumped out at them; jot down your reflections; check the notes in your Study Bible for insight or help. Grapple with what the Spirit is saying to you, your group, the church—write down some applications.

- **Reflect & Apply Together:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- **Pray together:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for and lay one concern before the Lord.

- **Dig deeper**

1. In what ways is suffering a part of life, love, and relationships that cannot be avoided?

2. Pastor Jim said the God we never expected was a God who suffers. What does God's suffering in Jesus suggest about life, evil and God?