

Portrait of a Servant

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Advent: The Oldest Christmas Songs

Isaiah 50:4-9

One of the questions that has fascinated the church for at least the last 1700 years was what Jesus looked like. We had a recent controversy over this when Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* was previewed by audiences. There was a lot of criticism because Jim Caviezel is perceived as not being authentically Semitic enough to be Jesus. They even had to recolor his eyes to satisfy the critics because Jim Caviezel's eyes are piercing blue.

Throughout history, Jesus has been portrayed in millions of different ways to fit either the racial makeup who were embracing Jesus, or their particular political, religious, or social agenda. For example, with the Christianization of the Roman Empire, Christ began to be portrayed as a warrior king, the ideal emperor.

SLIDE – Christ as Emperor

In the Middle Ages, Christ is often portrayed as a medieval Monk.

SLIDE – Christ as medieval Monk.

You see him there holding the book of the gospels in his left hand, the four circles on the book symbolizing the four evangelists – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. With his right

hand, Christ is pronouncing the sign of peace, benediction. His garb is that of a Benedictine Monk from about the 6th century.

Followers of Martin Luther, the great Protestant Reformer, portrayed the events of the gospels as though Luther had been personally present when they happened. Lucas Cranach, the Younger, painted this scene of the Last Supper for a church in Germany in 1565.

SLIDE – Last Supper

Look at this now. The twelve disciples are dressed like 16th century German businessmen. There is Judas in the middle of the painting with his 30 pieces of silver. But if you look over to the left in the painting, there in the group is the unmistakable face of Martin Luther and his colleague, Phillip Melancthon.

That's been a common theme throughout Christian history, to paint various notables, wealthy people, princes, emperors, and religious leaders into scenes involving Christ. And it has been a continual practice to put Jesus and his followers into the clothes of the period. Look at some of the Dutch paintings from the 17th century and Jesus is wearing wooden shoes with a windmill in the background, just as it would have been in 1st century Galilee.

People have always painted Jesus in their own racial image.

SLIDE – Sallman's Head of Christ

In many little churches in America, and in lots of homes, especially of the elderly, we have Sallman's Head of Christ. Here is the blond, blue-eyed, Northern European Jesus. There are, of course, East Asian, Chinese Jesuses, African American Jesuses.

SLIDE – African Jesus

Hispanic Jesuses

SLIDE – Hispanic Jesus

Sometimes wearing a poncho. Of course, in the 1960's the Jesus Movement produced the Hippy Jesus in a Peter Max, Beatles, Yellow Submarine style.

SLIDE – Hippy Jesus

There's been the terminator Jesus.

SLIDE – Terminator Jesus

And the Mentos Jesus

SLIDE – Mentos Jesus

Jesus has been used to market hundreds of products. There have been not only paintings, but wood carvings, statues, and mosaics, even funeral shrouds with Jesus'

image. We have the famous Shroud of Turin that has been alleged to be the actual burial garment of Jesus.

SLIDE – Shroud of Turin

I won't discuss the many portraits of Jesus on black velvet sitting on a Harley, or playing guitar with Elvis.

The National Catholic Reporter, in the year 2000, held a contest for a more contemporary portrait of Jesus. People were invited to send in their artwork, with their interpretation of what Jesus should look like in the 21st century. From nearly 1700 entries, Janet McKenzie's painting titled "Jesus of the People" won. As a model for her painting, McKenzie used a 25-year old Vermont woman of mixed race. Jesus looks androgynous. He has mixed racial features and his gender is ambiguous. Over his left shoulder is a Native American eagle feather. Over his right shoulder is an Asian Ying-Yang. Jesus, thus, became a person everyone everywhere could identify with.

SLIDE – "Jesus of the People"

Even the Discovery Channel has gotten into the act. They recently assembled a team of scholars to discuss what a 1st century man from Galilee might have looked like. From skeletons and various studies, here is a computer reconstruction of what they came up with.

SLIDE – Discovery Channel Jesus

I've been doing an Advent series from the book of Isaiah. Advent, as I've mentioned before, comes from the Latin word "adventus" which means "arrival or coming." 700 years before the arrival of God's son into the world, the Holy Spirit inspired the prophet Isaiah to write about Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, in four songs – songs about a servant. The four servant songs are found in Isaiah 42, 49, 50 and 53. I've called the entire series "The Oldest Christmas Songs." And in the third servant song, found in Isaiah 50, Isaiah focuses his attention on the physical features of the servant. I've called today's talk, "Portrait of a Servant." Let's pray.

Isaiah 50:4-9

Isa 50:4 The Sovereign LORD has given me an instructed tongue,
to know the word that sustains the weary.

He wakens me morning by morning,
wakens my ear to listen like one being taught.

Isa 50:5 The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears,
and I have not been rebellious;

I have not drawn back.

Isa 50:6 I offered my back to those who beat me,
my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;
I did not hide my face
from mocking and spitting.

Isa 50:7 Because the Sovereign LORD helps me,
I will not be disgraced.

Therefore have I set my face like flint,
and I know I will not be put to shame.

Isa 50:8 He who vindicates me is near.
Who then will bring charges against me?
Let us face each other!

Who is my accuser?

Let him confront me!

Isa 50:9 It is the Sovereign LORD who helps me.

Who is he that will condemn me?

They will all wear out like a garment;
the moths will eat them up.

If you were to outline this text, in terms of the servant of the Lord's portrait, you could say that in v. 4, Isaiah focuses on the servant's mouth.

SLIDE

Isa 50:4 The Sovereign LORD has given me an instructed tongue,
to know the word that sustains the weary.
He wakens me morning by morning,
wakens my ear to listen like one being taught.

In vv. 4b-5, Isaiah focuses attention on the servant's ear.

SLIDE

He wakens me morning by morning,
wakens my ear to listen like one being taught.
Isa 50:5 The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears,
and I have not been rebellious;
I have not drawn back.

In v. 6, Isaiah portrays the servant's back and cheeks.

SLIDE

Isa 50:6 I offered my back to those who beat me,
my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;
I did not hide my face
from mocking and spitting

In v. 7, Isaiah calls us to consider the servant's face.

SLIDE

Isa 50:7 Because the Sovereign LORD helps me,

I will not be disgraced.
Therefore have I set my face like flint,
and I know I will not be put to shame.

Well, let's take a look at the Servant's mouth. Isaiah says the Servant has an instructed tongue. The Sovereign Lord has given me an instructed tongue. In other words, the Servant of the Lord lived in dependence upon God regarding what he said. And this is perfectly consistent with the gospel of John's portrayal of Jesus. One thing that comes out of the gospel of John is the dependence of Jesus upon the Father for everything that Christ said and did. When Christ spoke, he spoke the Father's words.

SLIDE – John 3:34

Jn 3:34 For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit.

SLIDE – John 12:49

Jn 12:49 For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it.

SLIDE – John 17:8

Jn 17:8 For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me.

The Servant of the Lord doesn't make things up or speak out of his own mind. The Servant of the Lord lives in such intimate relationship with God that when the Servant speaks, he speaks out of a heart that is full of God's presence.

God's Word has a different quality to it than merely human words. Have you ever heard something and said, "That's God!" This person is not just offering me empty comfort, empty flattery, or a lot of spiritual talk. This word that has been shared with me has a weight to it. It rings true inside of me. This is not a guess. Have you ever heard something in a teaching, or someone is talking with you, and the word that was shared felt like one of those smart bombs? It just came screaming in and was a perfect hit. The word was the challenge you needed at that moment. The axe fell straight and true. We can't share a word that brings powerful conviction, or perfect comfort unless we live in the relationship of a disciple to his or her master, speaking out of intimacy with God.

Last weekend in one of our services there was a prophetic word shared at the end of the service in which a person said that some of you felt like you were being whittled away by life and God sees that and knows that. There was a word of comfort added. After the service, a woman came up and said that just that morning she said to God, "I feel like I'm being whittled away to nothing. I feel like I'm just a stick that's being shaved away. Do you see me? Do you know me?"

Don't you want to be able to speak in such a way that God speaks through you? The Servant of the Lord not only speaks with an instructed tongue, but also with a sustaining tongue. Isaiah 50:4,

SLIDE

Isa 50:4 The Sovereign LORD has given me an instructed tongue,
to know the word that sustains the weary

What is it that makes you weary? What makes you feel like it is really difficult to go on in your followership of Christ? What is it that makes you want to throw in the towel and just quit?

I know for me I get weary when I pray and pray and don't see any results. There is no healing, there is no change in a situation, a person I'm praying for does not come to repentance. Praying and not seeing any results makes me weary. What makes you weary?

Perhaps you experience the weariness of doing your best and not seeing any fruit. You are sending out dozens of resumes. You are trying to be upbeat, but there have been no job interviews. You are obeying, you're trying, but there is no results in healing your marriage. Maybe you get weary when you are hurting, or you need direction and people try to help, but they are just offering their own empty opinions. What you need is a word from God.

At crucial times in the history of Israel, and in the life history of individuals, the Word of the Lord came to strengthen the weary. Let me share with you a couple of words that are regularly repeated by Servants of the Lord in the bible to strengthen those who are tempted to give up - the word that comes to call people

to crash through the quitting point. One of the most common words that the Lord speaks through his servants to sustain the weary is the simple statement:

SLIDE

I am with you, says the Lord.

When Joshua took over leadership from Moses, the greatest spiritual leader the Israelites had ever known, Joshua was trying to fill enormous shoes and was called upon to lead a nation in crisis as they were facing Canaanite opposition in the Promised Land. The Word of the Lord came to Joshua in Joshua 1:5,

SLIDE

Jos 1:5 No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.

When the Israelites were discouraged because their Temple had been burned to the ground - and although they laid a new foundation for building the Temple, for sixteen years the Temple was not built because of governmental opposition and opposition from people in the land - what does Haggai say to a discouraged people, a people who say this work is never going to get done? We're never going to see any fruit. There's never going to be any change. Haggai 1:13

SLIDE

Hag 1:13 Then Haggai, the LORD'S messenger, gave this message of the LORD to the people: "I am with you," declares the LORD

What did the apostle Paul need to hear when he might have been tempted to become discouraged or to quit because of opposition in the city of Corinth? Acts 18:9-10

SLIDE

Ac 18:9 One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent.

Ac 18:10 For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city."

"I am with you" is the word of the Lord to Isaac in Genesis 26, to Jacob in Genesis 28, to Moses in Exodus 3, to Jeremiah in Jeremiah 1, and to us in Matthew 28:20 as part of the Great Commission.

SLIDE

Mt 28:20 And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

What word from the Lord does someone who is weary need to hear? You are not alone. You may feel like you are fighting the battle all by yourself. That you are by yourself trying to fix your marriage. You are by yourself trying to straighten out a wayward child, or dig out of a financial hole. You may feel isolated and unprotected and unprovided for. But the Lord says: I am with you.

What word does a person need to hear when they are weary? Here's another repeated word in scripture: Be strong. That word was repeatedly spoken to Joshua, Joshua 1:6-7,

SLIDE

Jos 1:6 “Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them.

Jos 1:7 Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go.

Joshua spoke this word, be strong, to his fellow Israelites. Joshua 10:25,

SLIDE

Jos 10:25 Joshua said to them, “Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Be strong and courageous. This is what the LORD will do to all the enemies you are going to fight.”

David said the same thing to Solomon in 1 Kings. The angel of the Lord told Daniel in Daniel 10,

SLIDE

Be strong now. Be strong. Do not be afraid.

And Paul says this to Timothy in 2 Tim. 2:1

SLIDE

2Ti 2:1 You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

How many of you are in a situation where you are tempted to throw in the towel and you need to hear the word: Be strong in the Lord! Don't give into temptation! Allow yourself to be strengthened in God to not give up. Don't give up in your

fight against an addiction. Don't give up in your relationship with God. As a Servant of the Lord, what word do you need to speak to a coworker, an employee, your roommate, your wife or husband, your child this week that would sustain them?

Words matter. Words have power. One of the people that I think was able to sustain with a word the weary was Winston Churchill. In May 1940, Neville Chamberlain had been removed as Great Britain's prime minister by the King because of his inaction in the threat of war from Germany. Winston Churchill was assigned to the position. In his first speech to the House of Commons, when nearly all of Europe had been taken by the Nazis, Churchill said:

I would say to the House, as I've said to those who have joined this government: I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering. You ask what is our policy? I can say: It is to wage war, by sea, land, and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalog of human crime. That is our policy. You ask what is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory there is not survival. Let that be realized; no survival for the British Empire, no survival for all that the British Empire has stood for, no survival for the urgent impulse of the ages, that mankind will move forward

towards this goal. But I take up my task with buoyancy and hope. I feel sure that our cause will not be suffered to fail among men. At this time I feel entitled to claim with the aid of all, and I say, "Come then, let us go forward together with our united strength."

Churchill's speeches throughout the war sustained the weary. We're not Winston Churchills. But, simple words like the Lord says he is with you, and be strong and of good courage.

And then we turn in the portrait of the servant to the servant's ear. V. 4, 5

SLIDE

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Isa 50:5 The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears,
and I have not been rebellious;
I have not drawn back.

The Christian leader, John Stott, whose influence in the evangelical world in the 20th century is certainly near the top of the list of all Christian leaders alongside of Billy Graham and CS Lewis, once wrote these words: "For although all our bodily organs are to be consecrated and presented to God (including our eyes and lips, our hands and feet), a good case can be made for regarding our ears as the

most important. Every true disciple is a listener.” The servant of God is a listener to God.

This is a constant theme in the Old Testament in each of the three major sections of the Old Testament. We read back in the law, in the book of Deuteronomy, Deut. 6:4,

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Dt 6:4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

In the book of Psalms, Ps. 95:7-8,

SLIDE

Ps 95:7

...Today, if you hear his voice,
Ps 95:8 do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah,
as you did that day at Massah in the desert,

And in the prophets we read in Jeremiah 13:10,

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Jer 13:10 These wicked people, who refuse to listen to my words, who follow the stubbornness of their hearts and go after other gods to serve and worship them, will be like this belt—completely useless!

And Zechariah 7:13,

SLIDE

Zec 7:13 “ ‘When I called, they did not listen; so when they called, I would not listen,’ says the LORD Almighty.

Over and over God says to the people of Israel, listen to me. Keep your ears open to me. The Servant of the Lord is primarily one who listens to the Lord. Let me put it this way. God does not need your great sacrifice, or my great sacrifice. That is not what God is looking for.

So often, when people think about becoming disciples of Christ, really giving their lives to God, they say to themselves: Well, if I'm going to really be a follower of Christ, that means I've got to do something radical for God. I've got to be willing to go to Saudi Arabia and live out in a desert in a tent, trying to communicate the gospel with Muslim fundamentalists, even though I don't speak a word of Arabic and I hate the heat and camels. So many folks think discipleship means: I've got to make a great sacrifice to God. I need to live in the most wretched conditions in the inner city.

But that's not what it means to be a servant of the Lord, a disciple of Jesus Christ. Servants of the Lord have open ears to God. What God is looking for from you, friend, is not your great sacrifice. What God really desires from you is your obedience. He simply wants you to obey him. That may be in a big thing to leave your job, to move from success to insignificance, or it may be a little thing. But I know if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, God is always putting his finger on something in your life, some choice he wants you to make, where you are

resisting him. God is not going to be satisfied if you move to Saudi Arabia and still refuse to reconcile that one relationship with your parents or someone else this Christmas. We can't buy God off by an extravagant gift. Is there one point of obedience that God wants to address – your relationship with the opposite sex, a person you need to visit, a financial gift you need to make, a ministry or small group you need to join in the church?

I heard someone say years ago: The pay is the same whether you park cars for the Lord, or you are a missionary. Whatever God calls you into, that's what he wants you to do. He is not looking for you to become heroic. He just wants you to be obedient.

Now, how do we hear what God is saying? The principle way God speaks to his servants today is through the scriptures. Jesus was constantly saying to the Pharisees: "What is written?" "Have you never read?" Paul says the same thing: "What do the scriptures say?" Your ear is not open to God, if you have a closed Bible most of the week. If your Bible lies on a shelf, or on the floor of your car, or is in your purse most of the week, unopened and unread, then your ear is unopened to God.

I believe one of the main reasons why Christians become spiritually stagnate and don't move forward is a simple neglect of Bible reading and Bible study. God wants to talk to you. The Bible is like a ringing phone. God is calling you. So

many people never pick up the phone and then they say: I don't know why I never hear God's voice. I don't know what God is saying. Pick up the phone by opening the Bible and listen!

And there is an attitude you need to have when you pick up the phone. The attitude is that of the little boy Samuel, who said in 1 Sam. 3:9-10,

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^{1Sa 3:9} So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.' " So Samuel went and lay down in his place.
^{1Sa 3:10} The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!"
Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Let me ask you a question. Do you have a regular routine of Bible reading most days during the week? I'm not asking if you think Bible reading is a good idea. I'm asking if you read the Bible most days during the week. We're going to be handing out Bible Reading Guides before the New Year. We do that every year. I would encourage you, if you don't have a Bible reading plan, to pick up a book in our bookstore, *Search the Scriptures*, and make a plan to use that each day in the New Year.

Having an open ear does not end by having an open ear to God. We also need to listen to each other. Bad listeners do not make good disciples. James 1:19-20,

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Jas 1:19 My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen,
slow to speak and slow to become angry,
Jas 1:20 for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.

What I get out of this text is that James urges us not to talk too much, but seems to imply that we can't listen too much. We need to listen to each other. Community depends upon communication.

That is certainly true in the home. I know that it is unpopular to say this, but children, you need to listen to your parents. This is a biblical command to you. Proverbs 1:8,

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Pr 1:8 Listen, my son, to your father's instruction
and do not forsake your mother's teaching.

This is particularly the case if your father or mother is a follower of Christ. Are you doing that children and young adults? Are you listening to your parents as God wants you to? And parents, we need to be humble enough to listen to our children, or we will never understand their problems. We need to be patient and allow our children to unpack their hearts.

Husbands and wives, you need to listen to each other. I've almost never seen a marriage break down that wasn't largely due to a communication break down – husbands and wives failing to really listen to each other.

And disciples need to be open to hearing what the church has to say. Proverbs 12:15,

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Pr 12:15 The way of a fool seems right to him,
but a wise man listens to advice.

One of the most frustrating things pastors and leaders regularly deal with is a completely arrogant person in the church who says, "Well, I hear what you are saying, but God told me otherwise." Really? God contradicted his own inspired Word? God told you to divorce without biblical grounds even though the Bible says God hates divorce? Is God confused? Or is it more likely you are sinfully using the name of the Lord in vain to justify your own disobedient desires?

The healthiest disciples I know are people who are willing to listen to the truth from God or others, however unpleasant that truth is. Their ears are wide open. They hear the word "no" from God or other people to their ambitions, their thoughts, and plans. Can you hear the word "no" from God? Can you receive correction about an attitude? If you want something, can you hear the word "no" from your parents, your spouse, or your church – to your ambitions, your

desires? Whatever someone says about Vineyard Columbus being their church, I'll tell you when the church is your church and the pastors your pastors – it is when someone offers you life-giving correction, when a leader says “no” to your plans and your behavior and you receive it.

Do you have an open ear, friend? Are there topics that cannot be brought up to you by anyone? Are there issues that are completely off-limits, that God, the church, your mate, or a friend simply can't get through to you on? Attitudes you have, decisions you are making that you can't be spoken to about? Whenever we close our ears, at that point we stop growing.

Isaiah then portrays the servant's back and cheeks. Isaiah 50:6,

SLIDE

Isa 50:6 I offered my back to those who beat me,
my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;
I did not hide my face
from mocking and spitting.

The language, of course, makes us immediately think of the physical sufferings of our Lord.

SLIDE – Passion of Christ Picture

I think of passages in the Bible like Matthew 26:67-68

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Mt 26:67 Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him

Mt 26:68 and said, "Prophecy to us, Christ. Who hit you?"

And John 19:1-3,

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Jn 19:1 Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged.

Jn 19:2 The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe

Jn 19:3 and went up to him again and again, saying, "Hail, king of the Jews!" And they struck him in the face.

But I want you to notice something here. Isaiah doesn't say that men beat the servant. He said: The servant declares in v. 6 that he offered his back to those who struck him. He voluntarily yielded himself to suffering. The servant chose this course for himself.

That's what the New Testament continually says about Jesus. We think of Jesus as a victim of the Romans or Jewish authorities, someone who was crushed by a cruel dictator, a wicked government, or by religious officials. The New Testament continually affirms that Jesus voluntarily chose the path of suffering in obedience to the Father, a path he could have escaped from. John 10:17-18,

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Jn 10:17 The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again.

Jn 10:18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

The servant of the Lord not only gave his back to be beaten, but his cheeks to those who plucked out the beard. In Middle Eastern societies, the beard is a sign of dignity, freedom, and value of a man. To pull out a beard is to show a man utter contempt. Yet this servant not only allowed himself to be shown contempt, but he yielded to all of this without complaining, without self-pity. Even the prophet Jeremiah complained about how he was treated, but not Jesus the Messiah. The spotless Lamb of God – he alone is without sin or any rebellion, or resistance to the will of God.

Now, the necessity of suffering in this sinful world as an act of obedience to God is almost completely absent from contemporary culture. There is a pill to relieve the least bit of suffering we encounter, whether physical or emotional. The illusion that we live with now in the 21st century, is that no one needs to suffer any more.

Have you ever watched those commercials for mood altering drugs that have become so common, especially around news programs? And by the way, what is the connection between watching the news and needing to take mood altering drugs? Have you ever thought about that?

Listen, I believe there is a time and place for medication. There is so much good and so much help done in relieving extreme emotional suffering through modern medicine – chronic depression, anxiety disorders, and bipolar condition. But there is no doubt that there is a massive over-prescription of drugs to relieve emotional suffering that is not extreme, but the normal human experience of life in a fallen world. Look at the list of symptoms that these heavily marketed drugs are designed to alleviate – the normal human experiences of sadness, worry, loneliness, and fear. One medicine is marketed for people who “feel blue” for brief periods. Why can’t we be sad for a little while? What’s wrong with grief, if we’ve really lost something valuable, or someone valuable? The necessity of suffering, even for followers of Christ, is almost completely absent from the 21st century church.

Richard Niebuhr, from Yale, many years ago criticized mainline Protestant churches saying: “Protestant churches teach a God without wrath, who brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.” No pain, no sin, no judgment, no cross.

In the evangelical wing of the church, the church is so bought into the self-esteem, positive, possibility thinking, always upbeat gospel, that we also, even in the evangelical wing of the church, don’t really embrace the necessity of suffering as followers of Christ. As one televangelist put it, Jesus is like Coca-Cola.

Everything goes better with Jesus. This man built a huge church and explained in the course of building there was a debate on whether to have a cross inside the church building. The televangelist said: Of course, there needs to be a cross. After all, the cross is the symbol of Christianity. But I guarantee you, there's nothing downbeat about the cross at my church.

Nothing downbeat about the cross. Nothing negative. Nothing in life that will simply ever be really hard. No painful blows. Nothing brutal. Nothing unjust. Nothing ugly. There's not going to be anyone who ever experiences hunger or sickness or colds in the winter. Let's be honest, as followers of Jesus, we have bought into the entirely false idea that if you have Jesus, life should go pretty easy.

And then we read about the servant of the Lord being beaten, mocked and rejected. Isaiah 50:6,

SLIDE

Isa 50:6 I offered my back to those who beat me,
my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;
I did not hide my face
from mocking and spitting.

Read people's Christmas letters. They generally read the same way, "The Lord has been good to us again this year. We vacationed in Hawaii at a luxury resort. In the Spring, Tom got a big promotion. I love my job as senior vice president for

this major company. Our kids are all on the honor role again and sit first chair in the orchestra. Our son stars in three sports. We love our new home on five acres of land. It is so relaxing to walk in the woods each evening with our pure-bred, award-winning golden retriever dog, Boomer. Boomer is such a little stinker. Tom and I still love playing tennis at the Club. God has been good to us this year.”

I always gag when I get to that line. God has been good to us this year. As if God is not good every year regardless. As if God is only good when my world expands. He’s not good when my world contracts. When I experience the ugliness of failure in this world.

So many of us as Christians think that our lives are supposed to read like people’s Christmas letters, if we have Jesus when we pray. And so we Christians experience a double cross – a cross of suffering in whatever way you suffer, maybe you or a loved one is sick, or you are in constant physical pain, or you or a loved one is suffering emotionally from some psychological illness. You are suffering because you have a child who is doing poorly. You are suffering because you are failing financially or vocationally, or you’ve had a lot of job-related stress, or your ministry is not going well, or your marriage is failing, or you can’t get pregnant, or you desperately want to experience family, but that is not happening for you. Not only do people experience the cross of these pains, but most Christians also suffer a double cross from the feeling that there is

something desperately wrong with God, their faith, their prayers, or the universe because you suffer.

Thomas á Kempis, a great Roman Catholic writer, who wrote *The Imitation of Christ*, once said, “There is no person on this earth without some trouble or affliction. Who is it then who is most at ease in the midst of suffering? He who is willing to suffer some affliction for God’s sake.” In other words, regardless of your theology, regardless of your level of Christian maturity, regardless of how much you pray, or how pure you are, you are going to experience difficulties and trials because everyone in this world does. And the person who does best with pain is not the person who continually complains about their situation. The person who does best with pain is the person who imitates the servant of the Lord and who says: Until such time as you choose to relieve this, Lord, help me to model grace. Help me to model joy. Help me to model submission to you.

The person who does best with suffering says: Lord, I don’t embrace this pain. But I do embrace you in the midst of it. I don’t embrace this mess. But I embrace you in the midst of the mess.

The person who does best with pain says: You know, Lord, I want this to change, but until it does, may my joy and faith not be determined or molded by this circumstance. May I rise above this. May I conquer this. May I not be

determined by this, for the sake of Jesus. May I be like the servant of the Lord, whose joy, faith and obedience to you persisted even while he suffered unjustly.

Finally, we turn to the servant's face. Isaiah 50:7,

SLIDE

Isa 50:7 Because the Sovereign LORD helps me,
I will not be disgraced.
Therefore have I set my face like flint,
and I know I will not be put to shame.

Again, Isaiah is speaking to us about the Servant of the Lord. We read in Luke 9:51,

SLIDE

Lk 9:51 As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.

It ought to more literally read: "And it came about when the days were approaching for his ascension that he resolutely set his face to go to Jerusalem." He set his face like flint.

In other words, in the face of opposition, the servant of the Lord does not quit. Everything in contemporary society communicates to people: Quit! Throw in the towel. You watch this on TV shows. People are getting grief from their boss and

finally the hero of the story stands up, kicks in their computer screen, smashes the printer, and shouts loud enough for everyone in the office to hear: I quit! And what do people do? They stand and cheer.

You see this in the movies. The wife and husband are arguing again and finally the wife slaps her husband and says: I've had it. Enough. And the cymbals clang together, and the orchestra strikes up and everyone in the theatre cheers.

Do you have a story of someone who gets up morning after morning, to work at a less than fulfilling job, just because he wants to put bread on the table, serve his family, and God? Almost never do you have someone stay in a situation that is unpleasant just because a person believes God wants them there to serve. Almost never do you have someone say: Well, this marriage is really difficult, but I will not quit. I made vows and I refuse to throw in the towel. School is hard, but I'm going to complete it and get my degree. I'm not playing first string right now, I'm not first chair in the orchestra, but I'm going to hang in there and not quit. My relationship with God is kind of dry right now, it is kind of distant, but I refuse to turn my back on him. I am a servant of the Lord.

Let me ask you, friend, as you look at this portrait of a servant, does the portrait look anything like you? Has the Lord given you an instructed tongue? Do you find yourself wanting to say what God wants to say to an individual? Are you able to say something that will sustain a weary person? Do you have an open

ear to all that God wants to say, to all the truths that others need to bring into your life? Do you recognize that suffering and difficulty is normal in this life and that God is not short-changing you, or do you complain or do you constantly ask: Where is God in the midst of trouble? Are you someone who simply refuses to quit out of loyalty to Christ and the gospel? Are you a person who sets their face like flint and keeps going with the strength God provides? Are you a servant of the Lord? Do you see yourself in this portrait? Let's pray.

Portrait of a Servant

Rich Nathan

December 18-19, 2004

Advent: The Oldest Christmas Songs

Isaiah 50:4-9

- I. The Servant's Mouth (Is. 50:4)
 - A. An Instructed Tongue
 - B. A Sustaining Tongue
 - 1. "I am with you..."
 - 2. "Be strong!"
- II. The Servant's Ear (Is. 50:4,5)
 - A. The Listening Ear
 - B. The Open Ear
 - 1. To God
 - 2. To Family
 - 3. To the Church and the World
- III. The Servant's Back and Cheeks (Is. 50:6)
- IV. The Servant's Face (Is. 50:7)