

Isaiah 53
J.S. Bach's St. John Passion
Jensen home, Landstuhl
April 2, 2023

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our sermon text is from Isaiah 53, which according to Leipzig custom was preached at Vespers on Good Friday every other year, alternating with Psalm 22.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

As we listen to this beautiful and majestic piece of music, Johann Sebastian Bach's St. John Passion, we are reminded of the distinctively biblical and Lutheran position that God's revelation is hidden under its opposite (*abscondita sub contrariis*). Sometimes we call this "the theology of the cross," based on Luther's 1518 Heidelberg Disputation. God's power and beauty are hidden under the weakness and ugliness of the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross. Of course, Luther didn't come up with this idea. It's also what Paul says in 1 Corinthians [1:15]: "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." What looks powerful according to the world's standards is actually weak, and what looks like weakness and foolishness to the world is actually the power and wisdom of God. And Paul gets the idea from the Old Testament, citing Isaiah 29:14, where God says: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." The theme of God's revelation hidden under its opposite is found throughout the Scriptures, inspired by the Holy Spirit.

One place we see this hiddenness of God so clearly revealed in the Old Testament is Isaiah 53, about the suffering servant. The Prophet Isaiah wrote 700 years before Jesus, yet depicts with such precise detail the suffering, death, and resurrection of our Lord. The suffering servant would be high and lifted up, exalted (Is 52:14), not on a traditional throne, lording over the people, but on the cross, in suffering and weakness. His appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance. In the military you would say "fubar," fouled up beyond all recognition. Actually, that slang term is said to have originated in WWII and comes from the German, "furchtbar," meaning "horrible, ogreish, shocking." The physical and spiritual suffering of our Lord was beyond imagination.

He had no form or majesty that we should look at Him, and no beauty that we should desire Him. So despised and rejected was our Lord that men hid their faces from Him. The sight was so awful, people turned their heads away. When someone is suffering so much, it's often easier to simply look the other way. But he was wounded for *our* transgressions. He was crushed for *our* iniquities. His punishment brought *us* peace, and with His stripes, with His lacerated flesh, *we* are healed. All *we* like sheep have gone astray. And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. Bach brings out so magnificently the true cause of Jesus's suffering and death: *our* sins. Bach includes chorales, those hymns we know and love so much, to place us as characters in this drama. We sing: "I, I and my sins, that are as many as grains of sand by the sea have provoked for you the misery that has struck you and the host of troubles and torment." It is our many sins that caused our Lord's misery and torment.

Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush Him; He has put Him to grief . . . 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 . . . He bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors. Yes, it is our sins that put Jesus on the cross. But that's how He won forgiveness of our sins. Remember, God reveals Himself under opposites. Jesus's death brings us life. His seeming defeat is our victory. His rejection by the Father means our acceptance and eternal righteousness. Our Lord died for our sins, yet He also rose again from the dead and lives to intercede for us before the Father. This beautiful piece contains such suffering and tragedy. But the suffering and tragedy of our Lord hides within itself our eternal joy. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.