

April 18, 2025 – Isaiah 52:13-53:12

*“Who has believed what they heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”* That's the question that Isaiah asks in the midst of our Old Testament reading this evening. But it's really not Isaiah asking this question. It's God asking the question. We know that it's God asking because it's phrased as “us.” The Triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is asking us this question: To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

It's an important question. A vitally important question. More important than you probably realize. Because the answer to that question shapes how you see the cross. It determines whether you see it as foolishness or as the very power of God. And it determines whether you leave here tonight still bearing your guilt or resting in God's salvation.

The “arm of the Lord” is an image used throughout Scripture. It's a shorthand for God's divine power. Particularly, His power to save. With His mighty arm, the Lord parts the Red Sea. With His outstretched arm, He delivered Israel. The Psalms praise the strength of God's arm. And now God declares: the arm of the Lord has been revealed to the whole world. But not in the way that anyone expected.

Isaiah's prophecy begins with words that sound very optimistic and uplifting: *“Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted.”* That sounds like triumph, like glory. But what follows is the exact opposite: *“His appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance.”* He is disfigured, despised, rejected. His greatness is not obvious. His glory is hidden in weakness so humble that it's astonishing to us.

It's so astonishing, so beyond that of the children of mankind, that Isaiah has to spell it out for us: this Servant is the arm of the Lord. But His strength is unlike any human strength. Because His triumph doesn't come through conquest but through suffering. The exaltation of God's Servant comes through humiliation. He is lifted up, but not on a throne. He's lifted up on a cross.

And this contrast between God's mighty arm revealed in his Suffering Servant is something we see throughout the passion narrative. When he's arrested in the garden, Jesus steps forward, fully aware of what's about to happen. He asks the soldiers, “Whom do you seek?” And when they say, “Jesus of Nazareth,” He replies, “I am He.” And at that moment, they fall to the ground.

Why? Well, probably because centuries earlier, Moses asked God for his name. Who should I tell the Israelites is rescuing them. And God replies, *“Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I am has sent me to you.’”* The God with power to conquer all of Egypt is standing before these soldiers and just the sound of him speaking his own divine name brings the soldiers to their knees.

In that moment, Jesus could do literally anything. And everyone there knows it. The soldiers and the disciples. He is the Lord. The God of Israel. The very arm of the Lord in all it's strength. But Jesus doesn't strike them down. He doesn't escape. He allows Himself to be arrested by frail creatures of dust.

Because He came to be lifted up. Lifted up not in wrath, but in mercy. He came to stretch out His arms, not in power, but in love. He came to reveal the strength of God in the weakness of the cross.

The world doesn't understand this. The world can't believe this. That's why Isaiah asks, *“Who has believed what he has heard from us?”* The Servant of God comes not with majesty or beauty. *“He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.”* There is nothing outwardly attractive about a man beaten, mocked, and crucified. Yet this is where God is at work. This is where His arm is revealed.

And to add indignity to indignity, he suffers not for His own sin, but for ours. *“Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.”* He is wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities. Upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace. And with His stripes, we are healed.

That is what Martin Luther liked to call the blessed exchange: He takes what is ours – our sin, our guilt, our shame – and gives us what is His: righteousness, life, peace. But that exchange is costly. Not for us. The exchange is free for us. But it costs Jesus everything. His very life.

Isaiah says, *“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.”* In John’s Gospel, Jesus remains basically silent before Pilate. He speaks only when it is absolutely necessary. The One through whom all things were made by his Word says almost nothing. Except to declare that His kingdom is not of this world, and finally, from the cross, to proclaim, *“It is finished.”*

And those final words are the declaration of victory, not the groan of defeat. *“It is finished”* means that the debt has been paid. Sin has been atoned. Wrath has been poured out and exhausted. The serpent’s head is crushed. The work is complete.

But Isaiah doesn’t stop at the death of the Servant. He sees what follows. *“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 Servant dies – and yet He lives. *“The will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.”*

For the past six weeks, we’ve been talking about what those hands have done. They are hands that give. Hands that create. Hands that drive out demons. Hands that heal. Hands that resurrect. Hands that hold whole world. Hands that serve. But tonight, they are hands that are pierced. Hands nailed to a cross. And yet in those hands, God’s will prospers.

And this is the mystery of the Gospel: the will of the Lord, His desire to save sinners, to forgive the guilty, to justify the ungodly, this will is accomplished not by strength as we think of it, but by the weakness of the cross. The arm of the Lord is revealed in arms outstretched on the cross. The will of God prospers through hands pierced by nails.

A common question that people ask me is why did Jesus still have the marks of the nails in his hands and feet after the resurrection. It seems so odd that the resurrected Christ would have a scar left behind on his perfect, resurrected body. It makes people wonder: Will I still have scars in the resurrection too?

I don't know, but I doubt it. Because Jesus' scars are different. Jesus' scars aren't a flaw. They are a mark of perfection. They are an eternal symbol of his perfect obedience. The will of the Lord prospered in those hands. Even when that will was to suffer and die. The mark of weakness has become a mark of victory.

So now let's return to our question: *“To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”* It's not revealed to the wise or powerful. It's not seen by those who trust in strength or success. It's revealed only by faith. Faith in the one who was lifted up, that you might believe.

And it's an important question not just for our eternal salvation, but for our mortal lives here on earth. Because you, baptized into Christ, are joined to him. You are joined to Jesus, not only in His glory, but in His suffering. Just as the Servant bore the cross before the crown, so also must the Church. The disciple is not above the Master. We are called to take up our crosses and follow Him.

And that means we should not expect exaltation in the eyes of the world. We should not expect to be praised for our faith, or spared from suffering, or honored for righteousness. We follow a crucified Lord. Like Him, we will be misunderstood. Like Him, we will suffer loss. Like Him, we may be despised.

But we endure, because we know what comes after. The Servant was not crushed in vain. He was not pierced without purpose. His death led to life... and ours will too. Because His hands were pierced, ours will be resurrected. Because His arms were stretched out in death, our arms will be stretched out in praise to the Lamb who sits on the throne. We are not ashamed of the cross, because the cross is the very power of God. And we are not ashamed to suffer with Christ, because we know that we shall also reign with Him.

Behold the Man. Behold the Servant. Behold the crucified Lord. Behold the arm of the Lord. Behold the will of God. Behold his hands, pierced for you.

And believe. Believe what the world cannot. That in this weakness, there is strength. That in this death, there is life. That in these wounds, you are healed. And because He was lifted up on the cross, you too will be lifted up in glory when He comes again. Amen.