

GOD'S JUST SERVANT

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 42

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. (Isa. 42:1)

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday is the first day of Holy Week. On this day, Christians remember Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and look ahead to his betrayal on Maundy Thursday and his suffering and death on Good Friday. Since this quarter's theme is "Justice and the Prophets," we will look at Palm Sunday through the eyes of one of the prophets (Isaiah) and examine how Jesus upheld and defended the cause of justice.

I love making the Palm Sunday palms into crosses. Those palm crosses, bright green at first, soon turn brown and brittle. They remind me of this last week of Jesus' ministry, a week that began with cries of "Hosanna" but ended with cries of "Crucify him!" The Palm Sunday liturgy reflects this, as the Gospel reading of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the singing of hymns such as "All Glory, Laud, and Honor" quickly give way to the reading of the passion gospel and more somber musical reflections such as "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded" and "Ah, Holy Jesus."

It is tempting to go straight from the "Hosanna" of Palm Sunday to the joyous "Alleluia" of Easter without traveling the difficult road between the two. But we cannot see the light of Easter for what it is unless we first pass through the shadows of Holy Week.

Guide us down the difficult road of Holy Week, O God. Give us fresh new insights and a renewed will, that we may hear your Word to us today. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Isa. 42:1–9

42:1 Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
²He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
^{3a}a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
⁴He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

⁵Thus says God, the LORD,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it:
⁶I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,
⁷to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.
⁸I am the LORD, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to idols.
⁹See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth,
I tell you of them.

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

THE SERVANT OF THE LORD

Isaiah was a prophet of the southern kingdom of Judah in the eighth century BCE. Chapters 1–39 of Isaiah are set in this historical Isaiah’s day. But from chapter 40 onward, the book is

set some two centuries later. Jerusalem has already been destroyed, and the people of Judah are in exile in Babylon, events related not as prophecies but as facts. The name of Isaiah is not mentioned again after chapter 39. So it is clear that this portion of Isaiah was not written by the historical Isaiah but by an anonymous prophet living in Babylon in the sixth century BCE whom we usually call Deutero-Isaiah or Second Isaiah.

Perhaps the most fascinating features of Second Isaiah are the passages known as the “Servant Songs” (Isa. 42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–7; 52:13–53:12). These poems introduce a figure known as the “Servant of YHWH” or the “Servant of the LORD,” who is called by God to be a leader, suffers greatly at the hands of those to whom he has been sent, and in the end is rewarded by God. The fourth song is often read on Good Friday and contains many memorable passages, such as, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:6).

The Servant is first depicted as having been chosen by God: “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him” (42:1). Throughout Scripture, God’s spirit resting on someone is a sign of being called by God to a special task. It comes to rest on King Saul (1 Sam. 10:10), but later God removes the spirit from Saul and gives it to David, who would replace Saul as king (1 Sam. 16:13). God’s spirit came upon the prophets so that they could proclaim God’s word (Isa. 61:1). At Jesus’ baptism, the spirit of God descended on Jesus in the form of a dove, signifying Jesus’ call by God to a unique mission (Luke 3:22).

To what task has God called the Servant? The song states it plainly, three times: “He will bring forth justice to the nations” (42:1b). “He will faithfully bring forth justice” (v. 3b). “He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth” (v. 4a). The Servant of the Lord is the Bringer of Justice.

 **Through what means does the spirit of God come to rest on us today, and for what task(s) has God set us apart as individual believers and as a church?**

THE MESSIAH

In Judaism, the Servant of the Lord is seen as a personification of the Jewish people, who have been chosen by God and have suffered yet survive to this day. But looking at the Servant Songs of Second Isaiah through the lens of the work of Jesus, Christians have long identified this Servant with the Messiah. We understand the sufferings of Jesus to be redemptive, a view that is unique to Christianity.

The word *messiah* comes from the Hebrew *moshiach*, which means “anointed one.” “Christ” comes from *christos*, the Greek word for *moshiach*. So “Christ” is not a name but a title: “Jesus Christ” means “Jesus, the Messiah.” While the word *moshiach* is not used in this song, it is clear that the Servant has been chosen by God, and that is what anointing signifies in the Bible.

The messiah is a kingly figure in Judaism, prophesied in passages such as Isaiah 11: “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD” (Isa. 11:1–3).

According to this passage, the messiah is to be a descendant of King David who will rule over the nations and will usher in an age of peace. The Servant of the Lord is identified in Judaism as someone other than the messiah, because the Servant’s fate is different from that prophesied for the kingly figure in Isaiah 11. This understanding of the messiah was obviously in place by Jesus’ day: Jesus’ followers could not understand why he would be turned over to the Romans to be crucified. When Jesus was arrested, the disciples fled (Mark 14:50). They expected a kingly Messiah, not a Suffering Servant, and they could not reconcile the two concepts.

In Jesus, Christians see both the Messiah and the Servant of the Lord in one divine person. Because Jesus is sovereign, he lays down his life of his own accord: no one takes it from him (John 10:18). As the Suffering Servant, he gives his life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28; Mark 14:24). And because the Servant of the Lord is obedient even to the point of death, God crowns him as the kingly Messiah, bestowing on him the name that is above every name (Phil. 2:9).

? Why do you think it was difficult for the people of Jesus' day to consider that the kingly Messiah and the Suffering Servant could be one and the same person?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

It is easy, during Holy Week, to think about the work of Jesus in terms of what it means for us personally. Our passage today, however, reminds us that Jesus, the Servant of the Lord, came not just to redeem individuals. He came to redeem the world as a whole, and that includes bringing justice to the oppressed: "I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness" (vv. 6b-7). Jesus comes to set right all that is wrong in the world, to bring justice to all who are treated unjustly.

Jesus lived out his calling to bring justice to the world by elevating those whom society had pushed to the margins. Women and children, for example, were considered "second-class citizens" in Jesus' day, yet Jesus commanded that the little children be brought to him (Matt. 19:14), and he counted many women among his disciples, including Mary, Martha, Joanna, and others. In fact, the first people entrusted with proclaiming the news of Jesus' resurrection were women (Matt. 28:6-8).

Jesus' ministry was not only one of equality but one of inclusion. He ate with tax collectors and sinners, ministered to Samaritans (see John 4) and Gentiles (see, for example, Mark 7:24-30), and was not afraid to touch lepers and others with stigmatized diseases. Jesus frequently reminded his listeners that the kingdom of God was for all, Jew and Gentile alike (see Matt. 21:33-44).

As the Servant of the Lord was chosen by God especially to bring justice to the nations, we who have been united to Christ in baptism should likewise understand our calling to be bringers of justice. Our homes and churches should be places of equity and inclusion. It needs to be clear, not just from our words but from our actions, that we believe the doors of the kingdom are open to all. We must tear down barriers of race, socioeconomic standing, nationality (or citizenship status), political views, and all other human-made divisions because we are followers of the Servant who came to be a light to the

nations, to open blind eyes, and to release captives (vv. 6b–7). This Holy Week, let us follow the Servant of the Lord as we work to make our churches and communities models of equality and inclusion, striving to bring ever closer the beloved community of shalom and justice that God intends.

? What steps can you take to make your church and community places of equality and inclusion? How can we work intentionally to ensure just communities for all?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today’s Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.

1. Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple in Matthew 21 is an example of Isaiah 42’s vision of the Messiah.
2. Isaiah 42:1–4 constitutes the first of several Servant Songs in Isaiah (see Isa. 49:1–6; 50:4–11; 52:13–53:12). There are differing views of the identity of the Servant in the passages. In some cases, the Servant is seen as the nation of Israel; in others, the Servant signifies a special person; and in still others, both are signified.
3. Matthew 12:15–21 quotes this Scripture and identifies Jesus as the Servant.

A LOOK AHEAD

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
M	Apr. 6	Women Find Jesus’ Tomb Empty	Mark 16:1–8
T	Apr. 7	Saul Meets Jesus on Damascus Road	Acts 9:1–9
W	Apr. 8	Free Gift of Grace and Hope	Rom. 5:12–17
T	Apr. 9	The Dead in Christ Will Rise	1 Thess. 4:13–18
F	Apr. 10	All Things under God’s Control	1 Cor. 15:24–28
S	Apr. 11	Victory through Our Lord Jesus Christ	1 Cor. 15:50–58

RESURRECTION HOPE

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Mark 16;
1 Corinthians 15

VERSES TO REMEMBER

If for this life
only we have
hoped in Christ,
we are of all
people most to
be pitied. But
in fact Christ
has been raised
from the dead,
the first fruits of
those who have
died. (1 Cor.
15:19–20)

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

The resurrection of Jesus changed everything for the followers of Jesus. When Jesus was arrested, the disciples left Jesus' side and fled (Mark 14:50). After Jesus rose, those same fearful disciples became bold proclaimers of the gospel of Jesus, giving their own lives for the sake of that gospel.

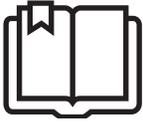
Jesus' resurrection even changed the weekly day of worship. Before the resurrection, the seventh day of the week was the day of worship. But the first day of the week, Sunday, became the day of worship because Jesus rose from the dead on that day. Because this day was set aside for the weekly celebration of Jesus' resurrection, it came to be known as "the Lord's Day."

Soon the early believers also began celebrating a special, annual feast of the resurrection, the day we know as Easter.

Easter confronts us with one of the most fundamental questions of human experience: "Is this life all there is?" Easter presents us with the possibility of life after death. Beyond that, it offers us real hope for life here and now: a life of joy and abundance (see John 10:10).

Jesus' resurrection changed everything for the first-century church—and for followers of Jesus today. In the resurrection of Jesus, the prophets' vision of justice for all people comes into sharper focus.

In the midst of our Easter joy, O God, stir our minds and hearts to a deeper consideration of the meaning of the resurrection. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

1 Cor. 15:1–8, 12–14, 20–23, 42–45

15:1 Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, ²through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.

³For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. . . .

¹²Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; ¹⁴and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. . . .

²⁰But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. ²¹For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; ²²for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. ²³But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. . . .

⁴²So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. ⁴³It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. ⁴⁴It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. ⁴⁵Thus it is written, “The first man, Adam, became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

THE RESURRECTION

The words we use to describe Easter illuminate different aspects of the day itself. In the New Testament, the word used for *resurrection* is a Greek word that means “to stand up again”: Jesus died, was buried, and on the third day “stood up again” from the dead. The apostle Paul speaks of the resurrection of all people. He writes, “Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?” (1 Cor. 15:12). Jesus speaks of the same resurrection in John’s Gospel: “The hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out” (John 5:28b–29a). We often call this the general resurrection, and we confess it regularly in the Nicene Creed (“I look for the resurrection of the dead”) and the Apostles’ Creed (“[I believe in] the resurrection of the body”).

Although today celebrates the resurrection, we usually refer to it by other names. The first Christians called this day *Pascha*, which is Greek for “Passover.” According to the Gospels, the death and resurrection of Jesus took place during the feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread (see Matt. 26:17; Mark 14:12; Luke 22:7; John 18:39). Easter is still called Passover in modern Greek (*Pascha*) as well as in Italian (*Pasqua*), French (*Pâques*), Spanish (*Pascua*), and Dutch (*Pasen*), among others. Easter is also called Passover because the events of Holy Week and Easter are redemptive for Christians. Just as Passover celebrates the exodus of the Hebrew people, Easter celebrates our exodus from death to eternal life through the sacrifice of Jesus, the Lamb of God: “Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal [Passover] lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed (1 Cor. 5:7).

In Germanic languages, the name for this holiday is derived from the word *east*. In English, it is *Easter*, which is the Scots word for “eastern.” In German, it is *Oster*. Why call this day “east” or “eastern”? In short, because the sun rises in the east. The sunrise is a beautiful, powerful symbol of the light of Christ’s resurrection and the new hope that it brings. Even though Scripture tells us Jesus rose from the dead very early in the morning while it was still dark (see John 20:1), Easter sunrise services are a well-established tradition. The dawn of a new day is the perfect time to celebrate the dawn of new life found in the Easter event.

? How do the different names for Easter highlight different aspects of this day? Which name do you think is most fitting and why?

A CELEBRATION OF HOPE

Easter is a celebration of hope. Paul writes that the resurrection of Jesus is the very foundation of our faith: “If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. . . . But in fact, Christ has been raised” (vv. 14, 20a). Our faith is not in vain. We have true hope—a hope that the justice proclaimed by the prophets will come to pass.

Paul describes Jesus as “the first fruits of all who have died” (v. 20b). The expression “first fruits” refers to an offering prescribed in the Torah. God’s people were to bring the first portion of the harvest and offer it to God (see Lev. 23:10–14). The first fruits were representative of the entire harvest, an acknowledgment that it all belongs to God. Paul says here that Jesus is the “first fruits” of everyone who dies. Just as the first fruits represented the entire harvest, Jesus represents all humanity in his resurrection. Because Jesus has risen from the dead, we all, too, will rise from the dead.

Paul goes to great lengths to provide evidence of the Lord’s resurrection, first from “the scriptures” (vv. 3–4), which in Paul’s day meant the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament). Jesus, too, explained to his disciples on the first Easter how all of Scripture spoke of his suffering, death, and resurrection (Luke 24:27, 44–47). Next Paul lists the eyewitnesses to the resurrection, including Peter and the rest of the twelve apostles (v. 5), a group of over five hundred people at one time (v. 6), James (Jesus’ brother) and the rest of the apostles (v. 7), and finally Paul himself (v. 8). Christian hope is based in God’s acts in history, most importantly in the person and work of Jesus, and thus is “an anchor for the soul” (Heb. 6:19).

When loved ones die, we do not grieve as those who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13). In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the funeral service is called “A Service of Witness to the Resurrection.” Though we mourn the loss and celebrate the life of the deceased in a Christian funeral, it is primarily about the resurrection of Jesus and our resurrection, guaranteed because of Jesus, the “first fruits.” For this reason, we decorate the church with white

paraments, and the ministers wear white stoles. The paschal candle is also lit as during Eastertide. The funeral liturgy is an Easter liturgy because as Christians we are an Easter people, even in the hour of our death. Because Christ is risen, we, too, will rise.

 **What does it mean for Jesus to be the “first fruits of all who have died”?**

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

It is interesting to note how Easter and Christmas are celebrated in popular culture. Of the two, Easter is arguably more important for Christians than Christmas, yet in our society much more is made of Christmas than Easter. At Christmas it is common to see nativity scenes next to Santa Claus and snowmen. At Easter we are not likely to see any “empty-tomb scenes” on people’s lawns! Why do the spiritual aspects of Christmas coexist with the nonreligious trappings while virtually no mention of Jesus’ resurrection is to be found in the wider culture during Easter?

Perhaps the answer lies in Paul’s words: “If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. But in fact Christ has been raised” (vv. 14, 20a). An examination of Christ’s resurrection requires us either to commit to Christ in faith or to turn away. We can celebrate the birth of Jesus without committing ourselves to any particular understanding of who Jesus is or was. If we accept the resurrection of Jesus, we also have to accept that Jesus is, in fact, God. Easter is far more confrontational than Christmas: it requires us either to embrace Jesus or to reject him. But once we allow ourselves to be confronted with Easter and with the risen Christ, we will never be the same. Understanding the relationship between Jesus’ resurrection and our own enables us to live in hope. Easter gives us an opportunity to invite others to investigate and discover the joy of this new life for themselves.

Since the Messiah is the Bringer of Justice, Easter is not simply about our personal redemption but about the redemption of the world. Jesus’ resurrection not only brings eternal life; it brings life to the world: “a new heaven and a new earth” (see Rev. 21:1). John writes that he heard a voice from heaven saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they

will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new” (Rev. 21:3b–5).

Jesus’ resurrection brings the hope of a world without all those ills that currently plague humanity. Jesus does not merely make “all things new” for us as individuals; he brings newness to all creation.

? How do you respond to the suggestion that Easter is not as much of a “big deal” as Christmas in the culture at large? Why?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today’s Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.

1. In explaining the nature of the resurrection, Paul faced the conflicting views among the Greeks, who readily embraced the immortality of the soul but had trouble with the notion of the body being raised (Acts 17:32).
2. In 15:35–44, Paul makes the point that there are many kinds of “bodies,” in which case the resurrection body is a new nonperishable body specially gifted from God (vv. 45–48).
3. In 1 Corinthians and Mark, only life through the resurrection of Christ engenders hope for authentic justice.

A LOOK AHEAD

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
M	Apr. 13	Mordecai Refuses to Bow to Haman	Esth. 3:1–6
T	Apr. 14	Haman Sets Decree to Destroy the Jews	Esth. 3:7–11
W	Apr. 15	Haman Builds Gallows to Hang Mordecai	Esth. 5:9–14
T	Apr. 16	Decree against Jews Struck Down	Esth. 8:3–8, 16–17
F	Apr. 17	Festival of Purim Established	Esth. 9:18–23, 29–32
S	Apr. 18	Mordecai Advances Welfare of the Jews	Esth. 10:1–3

INJUSTICE WILL BE PUNISHED

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Esther 3; 5; 7

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. (Esth. 7:10)

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

Today's Scripture is not from one of the prophets but rather from a narrative book in the Bible. This story touches on a theme we have already seen several times in the Prophets: Why does it seem that people's evil deeds go unpunished?

The story of Esther takes place during the exile, after the Babylonian Empire had been conquered by the Persians. A young Jewish woman named Hadassah (called Esther by the Persians) is chosen by the Persian king, Artaxerxes (Ahasuerus), to be his new queen. Esther bravely stands up for her people against the schemes of the king's vizier, Haman, who is bent on destroying the Jews throughout the Persian Empire.

The book of Esther is unique in that it is the only book in the Bible that never mentions God, nor are any of the characters depicted praying or worshiping. But even though God is not invoked by name, God's providential care for the Jewish people is evident throughout as Esther and her relative Mordecai are protected from destruction, along with the rest of the Jewish community. The events of Esther are the basis for the celebration of Purim: a joyful feast that remembers how a brave young Jewish woman saved her people from genocide.

The story of Esther is a beautiful reminder that God sees and takes note of the schemes of wicked people, such as Haman, and that there will indeed be recompense, in God's timing, for those who practice evil.

Gracious God, you have promised to be with us, even when we are unaware of your care. Be present now as we encounter you in your Word. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Esth. 7:1–10

7:1 So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. ²On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, “What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.” ³Then Queen Esther answered, “If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me—that is my petition—and the lives of my people—that is my request. ⁴For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king.” ⁵Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, “Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?” ⁶Esther said, “A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!” Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen. ⁷The king rose from the feast in wrath and went into the palace garden, but Haman stayed to beg his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that the king had determined to destroy him. ⁸When the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman had thrown himself on the couch where Esther was reclining; and the king said, “Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?” As the words left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman’s face. ⁹Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, “Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman’s house, fifty cubits high.” And the king said, “Hang him on that.” ¹⁰So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated.

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

PRAYER

It may seem strange to have a section on prayer from a book of the Bible that never mentions God. And while it is true that no character is depicted as praying to God in this book, we do find insight into prayer.

The language we use for prayer comes from the language of entreating a ruler or a court for justice. Such language still sur-

vives in our legal system. A *prayer*, in legal terms, is a specific request of a court for a judgment or for relief. Terms such as *petition* and *pleading* are other concepts we have applied to prayer. In today's passage, King Ahasuerus asks Esther what her "petition" or request of him is (v. 2). This is how one would formally address a king. We have adopted this language for prayer because when we pray, we are approaching the Ruler of creation.

Esther's petition of King Ahasuerus can be a model for our approach to God in prayer. First, we notice that Esther is reverent: "If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king . . ." (v. 3). Her reverence, however, does not preclude her being honest and direct in her prayer to the king: "Let my life be given me—that is my petition—and the lives of my people—that is my request" (v. 3). Her request is also very specific: "For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king" (v. 4). When we come to God in prayer, we believe and confess that God already knows what is on our hearts. When we are specific in our requests, we are not telling God anything God does not already know. Rather we are helping ourselves: specificity in prayer allows us to "cast our anxiety" on God (1 Pet. 5:7).

After Esther petitions the king and names Haman as the one who is plotting to destroy her, the king rises in anger and leaves the banquet hall (v. 7). He is probably moved by the sincerity of Esther's prayer, but his reaction no doubt stems mainly from his great love for his queen (see Esth. 2:17). When we bring our petitions to God in prayer, God hears and answers us not because of the eloquence of our words (or lack thereof) but because of God's love for us (see, for example, Matt. 7:11 and Luke 12:24).

 **What is your response to this question: "If God already knows everything, why pray?"**

CONSIDERING IRONY

Irony describes a situation in which something that was intended to have a particular result ends up having the opposite result. In literature, irony is often used for humorous effect, but it can also be used to drive home a dramatic or tragic point.

The story of Esther gives us some of the best examples of both humorous and tragic irony in all of literature.

Haman, the antagonist in the story, has plotted to destroy Esther and all the Jewish people. Esther's relative, Mordecai, has especially angered Haman, so Haman has had a seventy-five-foot gallows constructed, on which he plans to have Mordecai hanged. Unbeknownst to Haman, however, Mordecai has overheard two officials plotting to assassinate the king, and he has reported this news to Ahasuerus. The king wants to honor Mordecai for saving his life, and he consults his adviser, Haman, as to the best way to honor someone. Haman, in his pride, assumes that the king wishes to honor him, so he advises the king to plan a parade to honor this person. Upon hearing this advice, Ahasuerus immediately orders Haman to stage such a parade to honor Mordecai. This response is humorous irony for the reader, although obviously not for Haman!

In today's passage, when the king leaves the banquet hall, Haman throws himself on Esther to plead for his own life. At this point, the king comes back in and believes Haman is trying to assault the queen, so he orders that Haman be executed. One of the king's attendants mentions that Haman has had a seventy-five-foot gallows constructed to use on Mordecai, so Ahasuerus orders Haman himself to be hanged on it. "So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai" (v. 10). That is tragic irony.

We sometimes use the sardonic expression "No good deed goes unpunished." Irony in the book of Esther serves as a highly effective, memorable device to remind the reader that no evil deed goes unpunished. Haman had constructed what he thought was an airtight plot to have Mordecai and all the Jewish people, including Esther, massacred. In the end, not only is Haman forced to honor Mordecai publicly, but he is also executed in the very fashion he had planned for his enemy. Although it often seems that evil has the upper hand, Haman's fate reminds us that justice will eventually prevail.

? Name other stories, in the Bible or in other literature, that use irony to drive home their point. Which ones use comic irony? Which use tragic irony?

 The point is made here that justice will eventually prevail. How do you respond? Has this been your experience?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

At the end of the Book of Esther, we read of the establishment of a new holiday, called Purim, to celebrate the sparing of the Jewish people (see Esth. 9:24–32). Purim has been celebrated ever since, in the early spring. Here are some of the features of this festival:

Reading the Megillah (Scroll of Esther): The entire scroll of the book of Esther, called the *Megillah*, is read publicly, usually in the synagogue. A long-standing tradition is for all those in attendance to blot out Haman’s name, every time it is read, through hissing or shouting or by using noisemakers.

Sending gifts of food to family and friends: This is specifically listed in Esther’s original decree concerning Purim (9:22). Some of the most popular foods are cookies called Hamantaschen (“Haman purses” or “Haman pockets”).

Giving gifts to the poor: This, too, is listed in the original Purim decree (9:22). This tradition may also stem from the fact that Esther’s Hebrew name, Hadassah, means “compassion.”

Making a festival meal: This meal usually includes wine, since the saving of the Jewish people occurred at a “feast of wine” (7:2). Fasting is prohibited on Purim.

Masquerading: Masquerading has become a feature of the holiday, similar to the Mardi Gras or *Fasching* season that precedes Lent in Christian traditions.

Attending Purim Carnival: Jewish communities have elaborate street-festival- or block-party-styled celebrations featuring food, games, and masquerading.

Performing a Purim Spiel (Purim Play): Originally a comic, often satirical, musical of the story of Esther, the Purim Spiel today can be about any biblical story or anything relating to Jewish life.

Easter is the longest, most important celebration on the Christian calendar because, like Purim, it is a feast commemorating our salvation. As the Jews were spared because of Esther’s intervention, we have been saved through the intervention of Jesus Christ. Easter is not just a day: it is a fifty-day feast!

 **How are our Easter traditions similar to Purim traditions? How do they differ?**

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today’s Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.

1. The book of Esther is noteworthy for its lack of mentioning God and not including Jewish religious practices such as law, covenant, and dietary regulations. Even though the name of God is not mentioned, God’s divine presence and providence are evident. The religious practice of fast is used, and the practice of prayer is presumed from this, among other things. The role of God is spelled out more specifically in deuterocanonical literature written later.
2. King Ahasuerus (v. 5) was the Persian king Xerxes I (486–464 BCE).
3. Harbona (v. 9) is one of the seven eunuchs sent by the king to summon Queen Vashti to his banquet (1:10).

A LOOK AHEAD

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
M	Apr. 20	Solomon Makes a Just Decision	1 Kgs. 3:16–28
T	Apr. 21	Jesus Issues His Platform for Justice	Luke 4:14–21
W	Apr. 22	The Year of Jubilee Established	Lev. 25:8–17
T	Apr. 23	A Light to the Nations	Isa. 49:1–7
F	Apr. 24	A New Vision for the People	Isa. 61:1–7
S	Apr. 25	Zion Welcomes the Redeemed Home	Isa. 62:5–12

THE LORD LOVES JUSTICE

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 61:8–62:12

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. (Isa. 61:8)

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

Families and friends gather on a beautiful spring day to take part in the celebration of two lives being joined as one. The couple approaches the front of the sanctuary. The officiant addresses them and the assembled. Finally, the moment comes. The wedding couple faces each other and answers the time-honored question: “Will you love each other . . .?”

It’s telling that the question asked is not, “Do you love each other?” It is “*Will* you love each other?” We want assurance that this couple will love each other in every tomorrow. The wedding service is future-oriented, based on a promise: “Will you?”

Our most solemn ceremonies are based on future-oriented promises: “Will you raise your children in the Christian faith, teaching them to love and serve the Lord?” “Will you serve the people of this congregation with intelligence, imagination, creativity, and love?” We don’t know how or if our promises will be fulfilled, but we begin our journey together fully committed to living into them.

God entered a covenantal relationship with Israel and sought an obedient people who would live in the ways God desires, both corporately and personally. This covenantal relationship is solemnized, as a marriage is, with promises for the future. God in Jesus Christ has established covenant with the church. God vows to be our God forever. What does God expect from us?

O God, you call us into a future-oriented promise. Give us grateful hearts and open eyes as together we seek your insight into this promise as revealed in your Word. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Isa. 61:8–11; 62:2–4a

61:8 For I the LORD love justice,
 I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
 I will faithfully give them their recompense,
 and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
⁹Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
 and their offspring among the peoples;
 all who see them shall acknowledge
 that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.
¹⁰I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
 my whole being shall exult in my God;
 for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
 he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
 as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
 and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
¹¹For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
 and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
 so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
 to spring up before all the nations.

.....

62:2The nations shall see your vindication,
 and all the kings your glory;
 and you shall be called by a new name
 that the mouth of the LORD will give.
³You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD,
 and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.
⁴You shall no more be termed Forsaken,
 and your land shall no more be termed Desolate.

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

GOD’S STEADFAST LOVE

By 520 BCE, the people who had returned from the Babylonian exile had been in Jerusalem for eighteen years. They had come with high expectations of all that Yahweh would do. But life in Jerusalem was nothing like the prophets had envisioned (see, for example, Isa. 42). Instead of the expected prosperity, the returning exiles suffered scarcities of food and drink. They endured poverty generated by inflation

(Hag. 1:5–11). With no king, they were no longer a mighty nation. The people were humiliated over the failure to rebuild the city and the Temple. How long must the people wait for God’s promises to be fulfilled?

The prophet Haggai proclaimed that the answer lay in rebuilding the temple for Yahweh. His followers heard in Haggai’s words an invitation to manipulate God, reasoning that if they built the Temple, the Lord would have no recourse but to elevate Israel. To this answer, Isaiah says, “No.” Trusting in an edifice to win God’s favor is what got the people into trouble before. No, rebuilding Jerusalem as a city where righteousness and justice flourish was the point.

Ezra and Nehemiah sought the answer in communal purity. Before the exile, Jeremiah had counseled the people who had been taken to Babylon, “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease” (Jer. 29:5–6). Upon returning to Jerusalem, however, Ezra and Nehemiah instituted an ethnic purification among the returning exiles to cleanse the people from “everything foreign” (Neh. 13:30).

In contrast to the homogeneous society envisioned by Ezra and Nehemiah, Isaiah sees a radically inclusive community in which foreigners are welcomed. Isaiah 56:6–7 states that anybody who keeps the Sabbath should be part of the covenant community. God’s “house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”

The answer to God’s promised restoration is to be found in God’s character. God promises a renewed relationship, one founded in “everlasting covenant” (61:8) based in God’s *hesed*, “steadfast love.” By God’s gracious spirit, the city will sprout righteousness and praise. God’s covenant promises to Abram will finally be fulfilled. Yahweh directs Jerusalem to see her children coming from afar and, with them, the wealth of the nations (61:5–6).

? Which vision—the homogeneous society of Ezra and Nehemiah or Isaiah’s radically inclusive society—do you think best exemplifies a society where righteousness and justice flourish? Why?

A GREAT REVERSAL

The Bible is filled with people whose names signify important themes. Abram (“exalted father”) is to be the father of a great nation, and so he becomes Abraham (“father of many”); Jacob, “the heel-grabber,” lies and deceives, yet after wrestling with God all night, he is renamed Israel (“he struggles with God”). Naomi, “my delight,” becomes Mara, “bitter,” as her house is emptied of its promise. Joseph is told to name Mary’s baby Jesus or *Yeshua* (“the Lord is salvation”), because “he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). Jesus gives Simon the name Peter, “rock,” who boldly announces Jesus as Messiah.

As the prophet Isaiah envisions a reversal for the city Jerusalem, he announces a change of identity. Jerusalem, “the city of peace,” had not known peace for a long time. Following the Babylonian exile, the city was left in ruins for more than a century. During that time, God says, Jerusalem had become known as Abandoned (*azubah*) and Desolate (*shemamah*) (Isa. 62:4a). Israel’s neighbors had taunted the people of Jerusalem because Yahweh had gone silent, either not hearing the people’s cries or not caring. God had abandoned them. How else could they understand their situation? Into their desolation, Yahweh speaks:

For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent,
and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest,
until her vindication shines out like the dawn,
and her salvation like a burning torch.
The nations shall see your vindication,
and all the kings your glory;
and you shall be called by a new name
that the mouth of the LORD will give. (Isa. 62:1–2)

Jerusalem’s reversal of fortune is to be marked by new names and a renewed relationship with God: “My Delight Is in Her” (*hephzibah*) and “Married” (*beulah*) (62:4b). The covenant of marriage will replace divorce or widowhood. In the ancient context, land could be considered married (62:4), thus the promise of Beulah land. Jerusalem will be transformed into a place of justice and righteousness and give witness to the world of Yahweh’s desires for the entire earth. Jerusalem erupts in pure joy.

? Have you ever had an experience that led you to make a radical change? How did that change affect you? How, if at all, did it affect the world for good?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

God's promises always seem to be future-oriented. The wise ones of the Old Testament put it aptly: "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life" (Prov. 13:12). One of the most poignant prayers of Scripture says, "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (Ps. 13:1). Like ancient Israel, we pray to God to heal the great chasms in our world. We much prefer the joy of the wedding feast to the sorrow of the funeral. Yet joy eludes us.

It's not hard to view our country's landscape and see the ruins of the past, wishing for their restoration. One possible reason for the surge in entities like the Tea Party is a sense that the old ways have been abandoned. Others see elements in our government flouting the principles of our constitution. Such a sense of abandonment can create anxiety and fear. Through it all, God seems silent or absent. How long, O Lord? Will you forget us forever?

If we learn anything from Isaiah, we'll acknowledge that the past, for all its glory, sets the stage for a host of injustices. As Isaiah and the other prophets attest, when the people turned their backs on those who were vulnerable, God turned God's back on Israel. God's promise to restore Jerusalem necessarily embraced the rebuilding of Jerusalem as a city of peace and justice. We worship the same God and are called to serve the same God in spirit and in truth. Disciples of Jesus are to stand in solidarity with those pushed to the margins so that all "may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

Covenant expresses our relationship to God and God's to us. To get human life right, we must understand ourselves rightly in relation to God. No area of human life is excluded from God's covenant. The goal is not personal or national prosperity, but it is the blessing to collaborate with God in making God's grace and love real in our world. We are to be responsive to God's grace and all-pervasive, sovereign love in our interactions in our work, with our family, at our schools, in service to local organizations, and so forth. We are

challenged to put love into action—especially for “the least of these” (Matt. 25:40), to “learn to do good” (Isa. 1:17), and to “strive first for the kingdom of God” (Matt. 6:33), even as we anticipate God creating “new heavens and a new earth” (Isa. 65:17; Rev. 21:1).

? What challenges do you personally face when you consider ways that you can work for peace and justice?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today’s Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.

1. New Testament uses of the bridegroom/bride imagery for the relationship between God (or Christ) and the Church include Ephesians 5:25–27 and Revelation 21:2, 9.
2. The “sentinels” of verse 62:6 were some sort of prophetic guardians who interceded for Zion while on the lookout for the fulfillment of God’s promises. These have been interpreted to be either priests, prophets, or some kind of angelic beings.
3. Verses 62:10–12 once again emphasize Israel’s role as a light to the nations and God’s invitation to all nations to become part of God’s people.

A LOOK AHEAD

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
M	Apr. 27	God Promises Restoration of Israel’s Fortunes	Deut. 30:1–6
T	Apr. 28	God Will Shepherd the People	Ezek. 34:11–16
W	Apr. 29	God Will Strengthen the People	Zech. 10:6–12
T	Apr. 30	Christ’s Forgiveness of Israel’s Sins	Acts 5:27–32
F	May 1	Leaders, Priests, and Prophets Don’t Listen	Zeph. 3:1–7
S	May 2	God Will Preserve a Remnant	Zeph. 3:8–13