

We are two weeks into this global pandemic upheaval and most of us are doing our best to reorient our lives. I have spent most of the last week on a Zoom call and we're all homeschooling and home officing now. For others, the reorientation is more severe. Businesses have dried up, jobs are at risk, account balances have cratered, quarantine has led to loneliness, and the health of those most vulnerable is in play. It is a time of fear and uncertainty, a time to ask "what if?" questions, and maybe a time to look up and ask God what he is up to. That's what I want to discuss this morning.

I admit I have felt a tension of staying in our Isaiah series or starting over with something else. I have chosen to stay in it because this passage is full of hope, and I believe this morning's passage speaks directly to what we are dealing with today. I believe it tells us why this is happening and what God has done, is doing, and will do about it.

The theme we will see throughout the morning is substitution; one thing in place of another. We are all living in a world of substitution right now. We are substituting virtual gatherings for in-person ones, online classrooms for school buildings, and the world of food and diet continues its assault on deliciousness...why anyone would substitute cauliflower for mashed potatoes or try to make a burger out of vegetables instead of beef is beyond me and a clear sign the world is broken! But there is a **much more significant substitute** we are going to discuss this morning, and it has to do with a verse that tells us why we are in this mess in the first place.

**[Isaiah 53:6a] All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way.**

Sheep are safe if they stay with their shepherd, but sheep are inclined to go their own way and when they wander off, they put themselves at risk. Since the Fall in the Garden, we have acted like sheep. We have wandered away from our Good Shepherd and put ourselves at risk. **We substituted our will for his, which means we substituted ourselves for God.** The results have been disastrous. Our relationship with God was severed, but the damage didn't stop there. Our bodies broke, bringing death, our relationships with each other broke, bringing disunity and strife, and all of creation broke, bringing, among other things, death and disease.

**[Romans 8:20a] For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it.**

When God pronounced judgment on man, he extended it to all of creation, and the result includes what we are facing today. The world is broken, and Covid is a result.

We may ask why God let this happen. I believe it is a dramatic wake up call. When we feel the weight and ramification of sin, we wake up to the fact that this world is not the way it's supposed to be, and we are in need of help. The ease of life, the pace of life, the abundance of stuff may tempt us to forget that. **But in times like this, God substitutes our false sense of security with a true sense of reality.** It is physical evidence of a spiritual reality, and it's a reality far bigger than corona. Corona is just the next pandemic in a long line of pandemics, including smallpox in 165, bubonic plague in the 500s and 1300s, and the Spanish Flu in the early 1900s. Each of these are just symptoms. The real problem is much greater.

At our last house, we had a summer ritual for a few years where doors would stick and cracks would appear on some walls. We would patch up some of those cracks, some of them would disappear on their own, and the doors would eventually close properly again, but only until the following summer. That's because those were only symptoms of a greater foundational issue. It wasn't until we got the foundation fixed that the symptoms went away.

Corona is a symptom, a crack in the wall, of a much greater virus called sin. We will get past corona, but the real problem won't be resolved. I believe God will let things get as chaotic as they need to be to get our attention; that's the attention of believers who are spiritually sleepy and the attention of an unbelieving world who can't deny right now that things are broken.

While we may initially be inclined to say that God is unloving to allow this, not calling attention to the eternally serious problem and letting the world think everything is fine we is what would really be unloving. That would just be enablement that leads to a miserable end. God allows this for a purpose, and that purpose is found at the end of Romans 8:20 when Paul says God did this **"in hope"**. That hope is the anticipation everything will be made right. Its purpose is to point all of us to the person and work of God, the hope found in Isaiah 53.

**[Isaiah 53:4-5] <sup>4</sup> Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. <sup>5</sup> But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.**

Remember I said last week this this part of Isaiah 53 is a yet-future believing remnant of Jews who will confess all this as they look back on the life of Jesus. Last week, v3 confessed they saw Jesus as a man characterized by sorrow and grief and rejected him because of it. But here is verses 4-5, they confess their greater understanding. They thought he was rejected by God and the sorrows were all his. But they realize he bears our sorrows and griefs. **That has eternal implications, but it should also give us tremendous encouragement in this moment.**

Hebrews gives us two magnificent truths about Jesus. Ch.4 tells us that we have a great high priest who sympathizes with us because he lived the full human life and faced all the challenges and trials we face. Ch.7 tells us that Jesus returned to the right hand of the Father and now intercedes on our behalf. He didn't return to heaven to just hang out until he comes back. He is actively ministering on our behalf.

Did you hear that? **The Creator and Savior of the world is praying for you right now.** Whatever you are going through, he's praying for. And here's the beautiful thing. Jesus knows what to pray for because he's been through it himself. He's not up there praying about some abstract concept of suffering. He lived a life of suffering. He experience emotional and physical pain and grief. He found himself all alone at the end. His soul was troubled at times in his life. So whatever you are experiencing, whether it's fear or anxiety or pain or grief or sorrow or what ifs, **Jesus says "I get it"**, and he is right now praying for the Father to pour out his grace and mercy on you to help you persevere through every difficulty right now. And as Jesus is praying to the Father he wants you to pray to him.

**[1 Peter 5:7] Cast all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.**

Tell Jesus what grieves you, what you are afraid of. Whether it's health or finances or world destabilization or loneliness. Enter into his presence and cast, throw it, on his back. You are not alone. Jesus does not social distance. He draws near. **He has substituted himself for you to carry it on your behalf. He wants to help you. Let him.**

Also remember also what he did in the past that guarantees your future that you can hold fast to in the present. V5 uses words like pierced, crushed, chastisement, and wounds. Those are the consequences of transgression (rebellion) and iniquity (bent), the consequences due to those who like sheep have gone astray. They were the destiny of everyone who ever walked the earth.

**But just like we substituted ourselves for God, God substituted himself for us.** Jesus took on himself what was due to us. He was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquity, took on our punishment, and was mortally wounded on our behalf. He stood where we deserved to be so that we could stand where he deserved to be. And the results? Peace and healing. Would you take some peace right about now? I know I could.

You know what the most often repeated command is in the Bible? Do not fear. How can he say that? It's because he's made everything right, and if you have trusted in Christ for salvation, you have been given what he accomplished on the Cross. That's why, in John 14, Jesus said **"<sup>27</sup> Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."** The world will say, once this virus has passed, we are back to a state of peace. But we know that's not true. It's just a symptom, and the peace will only last until the next thing comes our way.

The peace Jesus gives is permanent because it is based on his finished work on the cross that solves the foundational problem we all face. It's a peace that comes from knowing our relationship with God has been restored. We were once enemies, but now we have peace with God. It's a peace that comes from being spiritually healed. Your spirit was dead because you went astray but Jesus revived it through his work on the cross and sending of the Spirit. And it's a peace that comes from knowing how all this ends.

Jesus says, "I go to prepare a place for you and I will return and take you to where I am to be with me." **IT IS THE HOPE OF THE GOSPEL!!!** If you have trusted in Christ, you have nothing to fear. God is with you in this life, he will take care of you in this life, and when he decides it's time for you to be done in this life, you will go to be with him forever.

If God laid all your punishment upon Jesus on the cross, this must be for something else. As I said earlier, I believe it is a wakeup call. **God wants to revive us, and there is nothing like suffering that causes us to grow in our relationship with Jesus.** When we hear the word "revival" but may think about big white tents or Billy Graham. But I believe there is a spiritual renewal, revival, that he wants to work in us and that he wants us to be a part of in an unbelieving world. But if we are going to have an impact externally, we first must be changed internally. This starts with you.

Because of that, I want to call our entire church to a season of prayer while we are in lockdown. I want to challenge you to pray like you never have before; by yourself, in your Life Groups or other members of our congregation, and Tuesday nights on Facebook Live. We had a great time with last Tuesday's Q & R. I will do that every Tuesday while we are at home, and I want to add in a component of prayer, that we would pray for God to move for our revival and for revival in the world. I know you may not like social media, and I agree it can be a waste time and destructive, but it also offers us an opportunity to be together and pray together.

I want to start this week by praying through Isaiah 53:4-6, that you would spend your time remembering who you were before Jesus, what Jesus has done for you, and who you are and what you have as a result. It will be a time of praise and rejoicing and peace.

I believe we have an opportunity to create new rhythms in our life, that what we start now will carry into the new day when this all has passed. And rather than trying to find the time for regular prayer, like so many of us do, what if we made it a foundational part of our life now and then fit the other things around it when we have those options again.

And as God revives our hearts, we will ask him to turn it towards others. Many of you have already done so yesterday with our blood and food drive. It was a lot of fun and we were able to serve the immediate tangible needs of many with **1500 lbs of food and 28 blood donations**. We'll do it again April 11. But as we serve material needs, let us ask God to use us to serve spiritual needs. I saw an incredible photograph the other day. It was taken at a Wal-Mart. Now, this may look like the empty toilet paper section, but it's actually the Bible aisle in their book section. God has the world's attention and he's not going to let it go to waste. He will use this to soften and sensitize hearts and he wants to use us to show them Him. **They are asking questions, and we have the answer.**

The God who used the suffering of Jesus to save the world will use the suffering of the world to point it to Jesus. We have our wakeup call. Let us run to him in this time of trouble, and let us point others to him so that they may experience his peace now and forever.