

## Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

Isaiah 50:5-9a and Mark 8:27-35

It is instinctive to run away from pain. We are hardwired to survive and pain indicates that survival is threatened. This instinct shapes our spiritual perspective. We expect that God will take away all suffering. God should be driven by our need for survival. We get indignant when we find God is not.

The gospel this week begins with an exchange about how people understand Jesus. Peter correctly declares Jesus is the Christ, the one chosen by God to free the people from suffering. Peter's instinctual drive to survive must have purred with satisfaction. He has made the safest choice! But, as if they are in some crazy version of the "Price Is Right," Jesus then reveals the rest of the prize package: he "must suffer greatly and be rejected... be killed and rise after three days. He spoke this openly." Jesus does not cover this up or speak cryptically as with the parables; this is the bald truth. Peter's reaction, to rebuke Jesus – literally, to expel this idea from Jesus as if he were possessed – reveals that his choice to follow Jesus has its roots in the wrong soil, that of survival instinct. Jesus is concerned with this grave spiritual error; he looks at all his disciples as he in turn expels the survival instinct from Peter. All disciples need to examine the reason they believe in Jesus and make sure they have fully understood what that belief entails. Following Jesus means death to self, loss, suffering and rejection.

Jesus looks at us today and says the same thing. He wants us to examine what we really want from our relationship with God. When things get hard for us, do we walk away from God? Do we seek the comfortable, safe life elsewhere? This plays out in our personal lives when we insist on having things precisely our way or being in charge of everything. It plays out in society when we set up companies whose primary focus is making us richer or when we support policies that protect our own interests and no one else's. In the story just before our passage, Jesus gave sight to a blind person. Oddly, it took two tries: at first, the blind person could see only blurry shapes, but after a second effort on Jesus' part, he saw clearly. Likewise, we come to fullness of faith in stages. If we want to move beyond a faith based in survival instinct, we need a second infusion of faith.

Is 50 portrays a faith rooted in the right soil. Our passage is most of the Third Song of the Suffering Servant. (There are four of them in Is 40-55.) The singer has let God open his/her ear to hear God's message. Evidently, this has led to speaking that message to others and violent rejection by the community. Rather than run away, the singer chooses to withstand it all; commitment to God explodes from every line. "I have not rebelled, have not turned back. I gave my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who plucked my beard. My face I did not shield from buffets and spitting." Is this crazy talk? The Servant has entered into a pact with God who is now the singer's help or *'āzar* in Hebrew. "*'Āzar* almost always denotes divine assistance, help that no human could imagine, much less provide."<sup>1</sup> Because the Lord God is the Servant's *'āzar*, he/she no longer cares about survival. To paraphrase Jesus, the singer now thinks as God does. Living out what God thinks supersedes all other concerns.

If the Suffering Servant's song is not a tune you want to sing, consider how God has already helped you live what God thinks. Reflect on raising children: it has been God's invitation to think about someone else besides yourself, indeed to sacrifice sleep, self-care, weekends, money and more. And right from the first moment, you said "yes!" to the grace of God shaping you into a more and more selfless person. Even when your children shouted, "I hate you," totaled the car, became addicted and stole from you, married an abusive spouse or chose to be a huge jerk, you stayed with them. Even if you have not raised children, you have similar stories of caring for another or caring for a cause beyond what makes sense to your survival instinct. We all, by the grace of God, have received partial sight and can declare with Peter that Jesus is the Christ. Now God invites us to the fullness of sight, a faith rooted in passionate commitment to God's perspective, a life lost in order to be saved.

- ❖ Where is God providing you or others with *'āzar*, help beyond your wildest imagination?
- ❖ Where is God inviting you to sacrifice more, to make a deeper commitment to loving kindness?

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Nagel, *Workbook for Lectors, Gospel Readers and Proclaimers of the Word 2021*. LTP, 2020, p. 254.