



Day 2: O God, the Healer, Liberator, Savior of the World

Isaiah 42:1–12

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. ² He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; ³ a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. ⁴ He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching. ⁵ Thus 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: ⁶ I 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, ⁷ to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. ⁸ I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. ⁹ See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them. ¹⁰ Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise from the end of the earth! Let the sea roar and all that fills it, the coastlands and their inhabitants. ¹¹ Let the desert and its towns lift up their voice, the villages that Kedar inhabits; let the inhabitants of Sela sing for joy, let them shout from the tops of the mountains. ¹² Let them give glory to the Lord, and declare his praise in the coastlands.

Our modern world seems to be easily captivated by heroes. Sporting champions, movie stars and the powerful rich hit the headlines and revel in the glory. The way of the world is the way of human glory. The way of God, in this text, is a different way: the way of the servant, the way of the cross.

The context

This text is one of a cluster of texts from chapters 40–55 in Isaiah that focus on the figure of the servant. These poems, therefore, are sometimes called “Servant Songs.” The key figure or character in these poems is usually called the “Suffering Servant.” (cf. Isa 42:1–4, 49:1–6; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12).

We are not sure when these poems were written, but they clearly reflect a period of suffering and oppression for God’s people, perhaps the period when part of God’s people were in exile in Babylon (after 586 BCE) and the rest were ruled by foreigners in Palestine.

This study will focus on the first of these poems, but we should be aware that in the final poem, one of the key roles of this servant figure is that of healer. Keep this passage in mind, especially as it relates to the above poem:

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed (Isa 53:4–5).

These verses make it clear that what happens to the servant “makes us whole,” that is, brings us true *shalom* and “healing.” With this and the Assembly theme in mind, we might well designate this figure the Healing Servant.

In these poems, what kind of suffering does the Suffering Servant seem to be experiencing? Share examples of how are you familiar with such suffering.

My servant

The “servant” designation is significant. The Hebrew term *‘ebed* usually means slave or someone who serves another. In the ancient world, a king or queen had many slaves. Often they were prisoners captured in battle. As slaves, they had no rights; they were the property of their owners.

In the famous Year of Jubilee text (Lev 25), it is worth noting that Yahweh calls the Israelites who were rescued from slavery in Egypt “my servants/slaves” (*‘ebed*). All Israelites, who became hired servants due to debt, were to be freed in the Year of Jubilee. The same was not true, however, for non-Israelites “from the nations” who had become “servants/slaves” (*‘ebed*) to Israelites. Non-Israelites slaves remained slaves (Lev 25.39–46).

The term “servant” *‘ebed* usually refers to those in society who were the oppressed and deprived—the slaves. Yet, God uses the expression “my servant” to address the chosen ones such as Moses (Josh 1:2). In our text, Yahweh, through the prophet, is referring to a particular servant who has been chosen to play the role of “the healing servant.” Recall that in the Bible study on Genesis 2, God gave humans the task of being servants to earth.

The choice of this figure as the one chosen by Yahweh to play a special role is confirmed by God’s claim that “I have put my spirit upon him.” This healing servant is anointed and filled with the spirit of God. The spirit (*ruach*) can refer to the life breath that animates and heals all of earth (see the study on Ps 104:29), and to a special gift from God to achieve special purposes (Mic 3:8).

Healing justice

Verses 2–3 of this text are quite remarkable. They depict this servant as a quiet, gentle, compassionate, caring person. Like a servant or slave who has experienced the pain of being crushed and humiliated, he will identify with the weak and the broken; he is one of them. In short, “the bruised and fragile being will not break”! This figure will not be like an ancient king arrayed in glory, who makes loud proclamations in the street; this is a sensitive, silent slave.

The goal of this servant is to bring healing through justice. Three times in the first four verses the term “justice” (*mishpat*) is used to describe the servant’s role. The quiet, compassionate identification of the servant with the broken is not only a reflection of his style, but of the very way to justice that he represents: the way of the servant/cross. Or, as verse 3 summarizes, “he will faithfully bring forth justice.”

The term justice (*mishpat*) in this context (as in the study on Mic 6:8) refers neither to legal decisions nor to retribution (retributive justice), but to the process of restoring and healing (restorative justice). Justice is the process of setting things right, especially for those who are oppressed or rejected, downtrodden or violated. The measure of a ruler’s justice is the way she or he treats the widow, the orphan, or the oppressed who are deprived of property and rights.

Liberating justice

The justice that this servant enacts is really the work of God the Liberator. Yahweh claims to have taken this servant by the hand as part of God’s saving and righteous work (verse 6a). This saving work involves liberating those who are in prison and darkness, removing the agony and humiliation of unjust suffering (verse 7).

Are there “healers” in your community who claim to have been filled with the spirit, or special powers to heal? How do they operate? Are they like servants who heal gently? Or, are they more sensational, seeking glory through the healing? What kind of healing does this servant do? How does he go about this?

The great enigma of this passage is the role this servant plays as “a covenant of the people” and “a light of the nations.” In that context, there is no reason to think of this as referring to the later missionary task of taking the gospel to all nations. Some scholars believe that bringing light to the nations means the verdict of Yahweh—that Yahweh is the only true God and all others are nothing—is to be revealed to enlighten the nations (as in Isa 41:21–24).

If, however, we remember the role of the servant as the agent of healing and restoration, the focus seems to be on more than a declaration of Yahweh’s status as God. Rather, through the servant an alternative way to justice unfolds—not only for Israel but also for the nations and indeed, as verse 4 acclaims, for the earth. This way of justice is the way of healing for humanity and for the earth.

Why is the term “covenant” used in verse 6? A person is not a covenant or treaty. The implication seems to be that the healing servant is a vehicle to create covenant bonds between people and peoples, humans and earth. Perhaps our modern equivalent is reconciliation, the process whereby peace and healing between conflicting groups and peoples is achieved. Healing justice means reconciliation.

How is justice understood in your community? When people in your community cry “we want justice!” do they reflect this biblical view of justice? Where do you see healing justice in action?

In Australia, the name of the movement to achieve reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples is known as the “journey of healing.” Are there groups in your community or church who act as healing servants to bring reconciliation and hope to conflicting peoples or parties? What kinds of processes are consistent with the “servant way” of a healing servant community? (Note the steps toward reconciliation suggested at the end of the Village Group chapter on “Removing Barriers that Exclude”)

Who is the Healing Servant?

There has been a long debate about the identity of the servant in this and the other servant poems. Some suggest that the Suffering Servant is a prophet like Jeremiah or the prophets as a group. Others think it is Israel who suffered in exile (Israel is called “my servant” in Isa 44:1), or a core known as the faithful remnant. Still others point immediately to the figure of Jesus, since in the Gospel of Matthew a number of links are made between Jesus and the Suffering Servant (e.g., Mt 8:17).

It is also reasonable to argue that the figure of the Healing Servant refers to a model of the way God operates, the way of bringing healing through a suffering individual, group or community whom God has chosen as an agent of healing. One such group or person existed among God’s ancient people. Groups willing to effect reconciliation by walking the way of suffering with the oppressed exist today. Ultimately, it is God in person, incarnate

in Jesus, who walks the way of the cross as the Suffering Servant who brings healing to us all, healing from our sins, liberation from death and reconciliation with God and between peoples.

How does Jesus reveal to us the way of the Healing Servant? What kind of way is the way of the cross or servant? How can we live that way, following Christ the Healing Servant, the Wounded Healer, the Suffering Savior?

The response of creation

God who announces the coming of justice and healing to earth and to the nations, is identified as the one who stretched out the skies like a tent and prepared earth for life to emerge (verse 5). This is the celebrating the Creator we will meet in the Bible study on Psalm 104.

The new and remarkable thing that God is doing (verse 9), effecting healing and liberation through a Suffering Servant, will be acclaimed by all creation. The seas and all their living creatures, the deserts and their inhabitants, the isles and the very ends of the earth are all summoned to praise the Creator/Healer/Liberator God. (Note the link here with the Village Group on the “Healing Creation”) The Healing Servant comes not only to reconcile peoples, but to reconcile humans to a wounded creation. The cry of creation is also a response to its own healing.

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In our worship life, how should we highlight the process of the servant Christ healing lives, peoples and creation? How do you join with creation in celebrating the living presence of the Healing Servant?

References

Westermann, Claus (1969), *Isaiah 40-66. A Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press).

Habel, Norman (1999), *Reconciliation: Searching for Australia's Soul* (Melbourne: Harper Collins). This book includes a series of Healing Rites at Seven Sites.



Revelation 7:9–17

⁹ After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” ¹¹ And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² singing, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.” ¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” ¹⁴ I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵ For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. ¹⁶ They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; ¹⁷ for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Revelation 7 is a wonderful interlude of salvation between the opening of the sixth and seventh seals. The plagues of God's judgment in the trumpets and bowls sequences still lie ahead, echoing the plagues of the Exodus story. Yet, even through the most difficult sections of Revelation, God's judgment is not unrelenting. Chapter 7 interrupts the seal sequence to assure us of the protection and salvation of the people of God.¹ This interlude also builds suspense before the seventh seal is opened.

Much of the book of Revelation recalls the Exodus story. In Revelation, God's people are called to undertake a dramatic new Exodus, "not in Egypt but in the heart of the Roman Empire."² Chapter 7 envisions our journey from the wilderness of tribulation into the promised land of God's sheltering presence. Links to the Exodus in this chapter include the Lamb's blood which saves us; the sealing of God's saints (Rev 7:3), similar to the sealing of the Israelites' doorposts with the blood of the Lamb to protect them from the angel of death in Exodus 12; and, the washing of robes, similar to the washing of robes before meeting God on Mount Sinai (Ex 19:4, 10). Palm branches in the hands of the worshipers are both a sign of victory (1 Macc 13:51) and an allusion to the Feast of Tabernacles, a further Exodus link (Lev 23:40-43).³ Jesus, the shepherding Lamb, takes the role of God's new Moses in Revelation, leading us into freedom. What other echoes from the Exodus do you hear in Revelation? How does the call to exodus ("come out," Rev 18:4) continue to lead the church today?

From every nation, tribe, people, language

This scene from Revelation 7 divides into two sections, the vision ("I saw," Rev 7:9-12) and its interpretation (the explanation by "one of the elders," Rev 7:13-17). Worship and praise are central to the scene, as to the entire book of Revelation.

Gathered around the throne of God, John sees a multicultural multitude "from every nation, all tribes, peoples, languages." This phrase and variations on it occur seven times in the book of Revelation (Rev 5:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15). Look back at the first reference in Revelation 5:9, a song of praise to the Lamb who has ransomed people from every culture and nation.

The Cuban scholar, Justo Gonzalez, likens Revelation's multicultural perspective to *mestizo* literature, addressed to people of a "mixed" cultural heritage today.⁴ We do not know details about the cultural identity of John, the author of Revelation. (He was not the same John as the author of the Gospel of John.) Writing in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), the author may have been a recent refugee from Palestine after the brutal Roman reconquest of that land, following the Jewish Revolt in 70 CE. He wrote in Greek, a language that most of his audience would understand, even though Greek may not have been his or his readers' first language. John was highly critical of Roman culture and of accommodation to the culture by some Christians in Asia Minor.

"Salvation is to God and to the Lamb"

The multicultural multitude proclaims that salvation belongs to God. "Salvation" in the ancient world was not just a spiritual term, but also a political claim of the empire. Beginning with Emperor Caesar Augustus, Roman coins and propaganda referred to the emperor as

Can you identify with life in a *mestizo* (mixed culture) situation? What is your cultural location? Are you reading this Bible study in your first language? How might Revelation speak to issues of immigrants and refugees fleeing trauma in our world today?

“savior” and advertised “salvation” as something achieved through military victory. To these political claims of salvation Revelation says a bold “no,” countering with its own alternative vision of salvation and power as belonging only to God and to the Lamb.

Worship God “forever and ever! Amen!”

All heaven now breaks loose with “Amens” and doxologies, singing praise to God. The hymns of Revelation are familiar to Christians—from Handel’s “Messiah” with its “Halleluia Chorus” and “Worthy Is the Lamb” to hymns such as “Holy, holy, holy.” No other book of the Bible has so influenced Christian liturgy or music. The entire book of Revelation is framed in liturgy, from its opening “on the Lord’s day” (Rev 1:10) to the closing eucharistic dialogue (Rev 22:17). Songs in heaven anticipate God’s future, giving hope and direction to God’s people on earth. Worship is central to Revelation, a fact sometimes missed by those who view the book as focused on apocalyptic predictions and timetables.

Those who have come out of “tribulation”

An elder interprets the vision in a typical apocalyptic question-and-answer format. Only a few visions in Revelation receive an explanation by an interpreter (*cf.* Rev 17), underscoring the importance of Revelation 7.

The elder identifies the multicultural multitude as those who have “come out of the great *thlipsis* (“tribulation”). The Greek word *thlipsis*, which recurs throughout Revelation, is key to understanding the historical situation of John and his communities (Rev 1:9). Apocalyptic literature is often the literature of marginalized or oppressed people. Most scholars think that the tribulation experi-

How do you picture “salvation”? To what false claims of salvation is the church called to say a bold “no” today?

enced by Revelation’s audience was not outright persecution or death, but rather acute marginalization and exclusion. Perhaps they were unable to “buy and sell” (Rev 13:17) or to participate in other aspects of life because they refused to eat food sacrificed to idols (Rev 2:20) or to offer sacrifice to the emperor (Rev 14:9–11).

What does *thlipsis* mean for God’s people today? Chilean scholar Pablo Richard draws a parallel between how people today are left behind by the global economy and the situation of Christians in Revelation.⁵

What hymns and liturgies from Revelation do you like to sing? How do worship and liturgy give hope and direction to your life on earth?

In a paradoxical combination of colors and imagery, the multicultural multitude washed their robes in the Lamb’s blood and thereby “made them white” (Rev 7:14). This may be a reference to the washing from sin commanded in Isaiah 1:16–18 (“though your sins are like scarlet they shall be like snow”) or perhaps a reversal of the logic of purification after the Holy War in Numbers 31:19–20.⁶

The shepherding Lamb, God’s sheltering presence

In even more paradoxical imagery, the Lamb is both lamb and shepherd of the flock, tending and leading people to springs of living water. God tenderly

Do you feel that today’s situation of exclusion under economic globalization is parallel to the situation addressed in Revelation? What other forms of exclusion in our world today does Revelation’s vision address?

How does the image of Jesus as a shepherding Lamb speak to you? What tears does God wipe away for you? How have you experienced God's sheltering presence?

cares for us and “shelters” (*skene*) us. The verb “shelter” evokes tabernacle imagery, the sense of God’s radiant presence or dwelling (see Ezek 37:27) as a canopy or tent over us. God dwells in and with creation and desires to wipe away all its tears. This image recalls Isaiah 25:8, one of the many Old Testament allusions in Revelation.

God’s people “will not hunger or thirst” on their journey through the wilderness, nor will any scorching wind or sun touch them (in contrast to the sun’s scorching of evil-doers in Rev 16:7). Verse 16 is the longest of Revelation’s hundreds of Old Testament allusions, drawn from Isaiah 49:10. For Isaiah it was a call to return home from exile. For Revelation the promise is that God’s people will come through the tribulation, led by their Shepherd-Lamb, into God’s new land.

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Notes

¹ See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), pp. 65–69.

² Pablo Richard, *Apocalypse: A People's Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 77.

³ See Hakan Ulfgard, *Feast and Future: Revelation 7:9–17 and the Feast of Tabernacles* (Lund: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1989).

⁴ Justo L. Gonzalez, *For the Healing of the Nations: The Book of Revelation in an Age of Cultural Conflict* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), p.59.

⁵ Richard, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 23.

⁶ See Wesley Howard Brook and Anthony Gwyer, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), p. 210: Revelation is not concerned that the enemy’s blood must be removed to achieve purity, as in Numbers 31:19–20, but rather declares that sharing in the Lamb’s blood itself generates purity.