

Don't Hide Your Face

The Rev'd Andrew Van Kirk

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St. Andrew's Episcopal Church

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the beautiful, bracing reading from Isaiah we just heard read, the one about the suffering servant, the prophet piles descriptive phrase upon illuminating image. It just goes on, and on, this slow parade of pain and suffering.

We read this passage today because we know what Isaiah did not. We know who the suffering servant God sent was. We know that it was Jesus Christ who stricken for our transgressions, it was our Lord who poured himself out to death, and bore the sin of many — of you and me. So it is that we also just heard read the account of when Isaiah's poetic prophetic language was realized in the ligaments of a flesh and blood man.

Somewhere in the middle of all of this, Isaiah writes, "As one from whom others hide their faces he was despised." Now we're obviously here today trying to not to be those who hide their faces; we are trying — as best we can — to face up to the cross.

But this made me wonder, from what do we hide our faces?

Looking back over just the last month, I realize I've been hiding my face from quite a lot. I saw one picture of one of those kids in Syria who died in the horrific chemical gas attacks, pupils narrowed to a pinpoint, dying on a ventilator. And I didn't click on any more pictures. I hid my face.

I read a headline about another refugee boat that sank, and that bodies were found floating in the water. I hid my face.

I saw one picture of the inside of one of the churches in Egypt that were brutally bombed on Palm Sunday. The blood covered the floor — spread all across the area equivalent to where you all are now sitting. That was enough of a glimpse. Then I hid my face.

There are more prosaic and problematic examples as well — the guy outside of QuikTrip who looked a little strung out. It was easy to hide from him by going through the other door.

Every year when we read the passion gospel reading, I wonder where I would have been in that story. And honestly, I'm not sure I'm in it at all. Had I been in Jerusalem 2000 years ago, I really don't think my voice would have been found among the rioters or the scoffers. But I don't mean that in any virtuous way; I just think I would have avoided Pilate's palace, and taken the long way round on the roads outside of Jerusalem. Just avoid Golgotha all together. Hide my face.

Who knows, but I think I would have been among those who thought Jesus was an alright guy, a guy didn't do anything wrong, but just got caught up in something bigger than himself, just got crushed by the wheels of power like so many before and so many afterwards. I'm sure there were a lot of those people, even then. The gospels don't give speaking parts these people.

Nor will history give speaking parts to those of us who hide our face from the tragedies of the present day. And I know this, but I also know that I hate twists and turns of the emotional rollercoaster that is reading the news, or scrolling one's Facebook feed, or even watching a sad movie. There's enough sadness that touches our life, I hide my face from the stuff I can avoid so I have a heart left for all the stuff I can't avoid.

Isaiah was right about hiding faces. There are a lot of people today for whom the story of cross gets no more than a quick turn of the head to hide their face. They don't have anything against Jesus himself (even if they might have something against his followers), they just consider him an ancient moral sage who found out the hard way that the world didn't want to hear his message. It's terrible, they say, but that's the way the world works. The innocent suffer; the guiltless die. Children get gassed; refugees drown, and Messiahs get crucified.

Do not say that.

The death of Christ on the cross is different. It is not one more tragedy from which to hide our face. We must fix our gaze, because this is different. Not because it looks different, but because it happens for a different reason.

It's different because it's not the will of God that children get gassed or that refugees drown. It is the will of God that Jesus Christ suffered and died on our behalf.

Five lines up from the bottom of the your reading here, you will find this line. Isaiah 53:10: "Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain." There's not a lot of sugarcoating on that one; just let it echo around in your skull for a second.

Do you remember how Jesus, praying in the garden before his arrest, prayed this prayer: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42).

Jesus dies on the cross according to the will of God the Father.

This matters quite a lot. It means that what happened on the hillside outside Jerusalem 2000 years ago was not simply one more tragedy in the world's too long list of them. It was not one more thing it would be easier for us not to look at. It was, rather, the central act of self-sacrifice in the world's salvation. Being crushed with pain is not just something that happens to God's son, it is something that happens because God wills it.

It's been said that the cross is like a mirror in which we can see ourselves — in it, in what was done to Jesus, we can see our own darkness. We can see our own need for a savior. And while this is true, I don't know that we need the cross to know this about ourselves — we could look at gassed children, bombed Palm Sunday worshippers, sexual assaults on college campuses, school shootings, or genocide and, provided we don't hide our face, we could see reflected back in them our own capacity for evil.

But what looking at the cross can show us, in a way that absolutely nothing else in this world can, is how much God loves us. Because God wanted this to happen to Jesus in his earthly life so it wouldn't happen to us in our eternal life.

The cross is a sacrifice; the Son of God gives himself that our mortal lives may share in his eternal life.

It is finished. He offers you this day his life in place of yours. Will you take it?

Come now. Kneel at the cross. Weep at the cross. May your heart pound and your stomach turn a little bit. It's not pretty, but God doesn't save us by being good looking. Hide not your face from his, from this offer of love. That final cry of dereliction pierces the air because there is nothing he won't offer you. What will you offer him?

I want to tell you one more thing. Look right at the end of this passage: "yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors." We are the many, and the transgressors. The ones for whom Jesus makes intercession.

Now I just want you to think about the context in which Jesus, the crucified Son, makes intercession on our behalf to God the Father. Like, do you think he has the Father's ear? Do you think he's going to get his way? Do you think, after so perfectly carrying out the Father's will, and at such great cost to himself, that the Father would deny the Son anything he wants? Like if wanted a sports car...

but that thing he wants is you — your forgiveness, your eternal soul, your love. This cross is for you; it was God's will, because he loves you.