

THE MESSIAH WILL OFFEND YOU

ISAIAH 53:1-3

Have you ever thought of Jesus as being offensive? He was and is. When you read the Gospels, you discover He was always stepping on someone's toes. He called out the religious leaders of His day as hypocrites comparing them to snakes and graves full of rotting bones. Right to their faces. Jesus attended dinner parties with people who had really bad reputations. As a result, proper folk questioned His morality. Then there was the time Jesus introduced Himself to the group who had turned the temple grounds into a giant flea market. Tables and chairs got overturned. Jesus used a whip to drive out buyers and sellers. At times, people who thought of themselves as real intellectuals tried to trap Jesus into saying something stupid. Jesus would best them every time. Jesus annoyed, irritated, and downright offended some people.

Dorothy Sayers, a Christian author, made this statement about Jesus: "The people who hanged Christ never accused him of being a bore – on the contrary, they thought him too dynamic to be safe. It has been left to later generations to muddle up that shattering personality and surround him with an atmosphere of tedium. We have very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah.... (In contrast, the) officialdom (of His day and time) felt that the established order of things would be more secure without him. So they did away with God in the name of peace and quietness." The most influential people in Jesus' day and time were so deeply offended by Jesus that they killed him.

This morning we continue a series of messages during Lent – a 40 period of time of spiritual preparation before Holy Week and Easter Sunday – I'm calling "A Portrait Of Jesus Before He Came." It's based on what Isaiah, the prophet, wrote some 700 years before Jesus was born in 52:13 – 53:12. No, this passage doesn't identify Jesus by name or give us a physical description. Instead, it does something far more important. In great detail, it tells us the significance of what Jesus did at the cross. It's a portrait of what Jesus did and why. So, as we did last Sunday, let's read the entire passage, but then drill down today on Isaiah 53:1-3. Those three verses predict – again 700 years before it actually happened – that Jesus was going to be rejected by the very people to whom He had been sent. Why? Because they were offended by Jesus. There are many reasons Jesus offended people when He was here physically. And He still offends people today. Let's think together about two big reasons today.

JESUS OFFENDS OUR PREJUDICES.

"Who believes what we've heard and seen? Who would have thought God's saving power would like this?" (Is. 53:1 MSG) The first followers of Jesus quoted that verse when they explained how negatively Jesus was received, "This is exactly what Isaiah the prophet had predicted: 'LORD, who has believed our message? To whom has the LORD revealed his powerful arm?'" (Jo. 12:38 NLT) And again, "But not everyone welcomes the Good News, for Isaiah the prophet said, 'LORD, who has believed our message?'" (Rom. 10:16 NLT) The OT prophets said one day God would send a very

special deliverer, a Messiah or an anointed one, to His people, the Jews. God sent Jesus as the fulfillment of that promise, but most of the Jewish people rejected Jesus as being the true Messiah. That's why He was crucified. And Isaiah predicted this rejection 700 years before it actually happened. It reminds me of what the Bible says about Jesus, "He came to his own people, and even they rejected him." (Jo. 1:11 NLT)

Why was Jesus rejected by the majority of Jewish people? The first followers of Jesus were mostly ethnic Jews, but very quickly they discovered that non-Jews (the Bible calls them Gentiles) responded to what God had done in and through Jesus far more readily than their fellow Jews did. Why? Very simply, Jesus offended Jewish preconceptions and prejudices. Most of them expected a few different kind of Messiah than Jesus. They didn't believe Jesus was born of a virgin. They thought he was illegitimate. That was a big black mark against someone back then. If you were born illegitimately, you had no real shot at living an honorable life. In addition, Jesus was born into a remarkably average, humble, working-class family and was raised in an insignificant town named Nazareth. God's deliverer – the Messiah – was supposed to be born into a noble family and be raised in a distinguished community – or so it was thought.

Even those who grew up with Jesus found it hard to believe He was the Messiah. There's a scene in the Bible where Jesus returned to Nazareth and the people there said, "Where does he get this wisdom and the power to do miracles?' Then they scoffed, 'He's just the carpenter's son, and we know Mary, his mother, and his brothers.... All his sisters live right here among us. Where did he learn all these things?' And they were deeply offended and refused to believe in him." (Mt. 13:54-57 NLT) Isaiah said there in v. 2 (NLT) that the Messiah's background would resemble so much "dry ground." "My servant grew up in the LORD's presence like a tender green shoot, like a root in dry ground." Nothing important or memorable about His pedigree.

Isaiah went on, "There was nothing attractive about him, nothing to cause us to take a second look." (Is. 53:2 MSG) Are you interested in what Jesus actually looked like physically? I am! It would be fascinating to know. Hollywood has depicted Jesus – more often than not – as a very handsome, rugged, physically imposing man with beautiful, soulful eyes and a warm, winning smile. I don't think Isaiah predicted Jesus was going to be ugly, but he did imply He'd be pretty average when it came to physical appearance. Apparently, there was nothing in the way Jesus looked in and of itself that attracted people to Him. People wanted their Messiah to look and act like a king. In our time in our day and age, Jesus would need to look like a celebrity. But He didn't.

Jesus' death by crucifixion was deeply offensive to many people in His day. That's how criminals died, not heroes! God's deliverer – the Messiah – died like a common criminal? The cross disqualified Jesus as the Messiah, or so they thought. How did Isaiah put it? "He was looked down on and passed over, a man who suffered, who knew pain firsthand. One look at him and people turned away. We looked down on him, thought he was scum." (Is. 53:3 MSG) Crucifixion was the most humiliating form of capital punishment out there. Imagine someone saying to you, "You know, friend,

Jesus died in the electric chair for you” or “Jesus was lethally injected to pay the penalty for your sins.” Our hymns and praise songs would be a little different. “At the chair, at the chair, where I first saw the light... There’s room at the lethal injection table for you... I will cling to the old rugged chair.” Jesus deeply offended Jewish prejudices.

The movers and the shakers of the community in Jesus’ day and time – the educated, the wealthy, the powerful, and the intelligentsia – found many reasons or excuses to reject and dismiss Jesus. They wrote Him off. He wasn’t who they expected. At first, they tolerated Jesus – shaking their heads, raising their eyebrows, and smiling smugly at this poor carpenter from Nazareth – as He went about His ministry. But, later on, they shook their fists, spit curses at Him, arranged for and, then, cheered at His death.

Do you think we’d react differently to Jesus than the people of His day and time did? Let’s do a little creative updating this morning and imagine Columbus Jesus. Let’s suppose Columbus Jesus was born in Franklinton – sometimes called “the bottoms.” Not the most desirable neighborhood in Columbus, to be sure. I can just hear someone say, “Can anything good come out of that part of Columbus?” Let’s imagine there were some serious questions about what happened first – His parents’ marriage or His birth. A virgin birth, you say? OK, sure! Columbus Jesus’ dad died when Jesus was in high school which meant he couldn’t go to Ohio State. He was very bright, did well in school, but college was simply out of the question for Columbus Jesus. Since He was the oldest of several children, He had to go to work in construction right away in order to make sure His mom and siblings had a roof over their heads and enough food to eat.

Now, Columbus Jesus and his family were very active in the little storefront church they attended. Some folk in the church thought Jesus would make a fine pastor someday. But there was no Bible college or theological seminary in His future. No, instead, His style was to jump into His old, beat up, “on its last leg” pickup truck and head out into the countryside with His Bible. Out there, He’d spend hours meditating on Scripture and praying to His Father. Our updated Columbus Jesus was likeable enough, but not impressive. He preferred jeans to suits. He couldn’t afford suits anyway. He looked a lot like His friends. They were nice enough, but – how can I say it? – they were just a bit on the lower class end of the spectrum, if you know what I mean.

Let’s suppose Columbus Jesus began to make audacious claims about Himself around town and supposedly performed some impressive miracles. But after a while, almost every business, political, religious, and educational leader in the city thought Columbus Jesus was a joke. And He did nothing to gain their approval. Instead, he deliberately went out of His way to call them a bunch of snakes and a cemetery full of rotting corpses. Columbus Jesus became such a pain in the neck that He was set up for a crime He didn’t commit. He was arrested, jailed, tried, convicted, and ultimately executed in the electric chair down at the state prison facility in Lucasville as if He was the worst criminal imaginable. Would you defend Columbus Jesus? Would you accept Him as God in human flesh? The truth of the matter is that Jesus would likely offend people and even us right now as much as He did other people back then.

Sad to say, we still evaluate people's worth by cultural rather than biblical values. We may deny it, but the color of someone's skin still matters more to us than it should, or their educational level, or their family background, or the size of their paycheck. We even size each other up in the family of God – fellow believers. “Oh, he's too uneducated for God to use... she's too poor... he's Black... she's Asian... he's had too many issues in life... she's from too dysfunctional a family.” We think we know the kind of people God will use or bless and those He won't. We're prejudiced. We forget what the Bible says, “Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don't see many of ‘the brightest and the best’ among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these ‘nobodies’ to expose the hollow pretensions of the ‘somebodies’”? (1 Cor. 1:26-28 MSG)

We can even be prejudiced about who will and who will not respond to Jesus' offer of salvation. “He'd never listen to me tell him about Jesus.... She's too messed up right now to find God.... He's got such a foul mouth... She's just too out there to come to Jesus... I don't feel comfortable being around people who live like that.” Jesus was never offended by people who were far from God. Never. Jesus was never turned off or put off by spiritually lost people. He loved them. He came from Heaven to Earth for them. Isn't it strange to think we'd ever be prejudiced against someone for whom Jesus died and rose again? How odd we'd refuse to be an instrument of His grace to them?

The late Howard Hendricks, a well-known Christian author and educator, was – for a period of time – kind of like a chaplain for the Dallas Cowboys football team. In 1979, Dallas made it to the Super Bowl and Hendricks and his wife went down to Miami to hang out with the team prior to the big game. They were invited to watch the Cowboys practice. Hendricks noticed an older man on the sidelines and said, “That looks like Woody Hayes.” He found out it was Woody Hayes – the legendary, long time football coach of the Ohio State Buckeyes – no stranger to anyone who has lived in Columbus for a while. Now this was a few weeks after Hayes had struck an opposing player in a bowl game and been fired by the university. On the day of the Super Bowl, Hendricks held a chapel service for the Cowboys' players and attended the team breakfast. He was sitting next to another legendary coach, Tom Landry, of the Cowboys. At the next table sat Woody Hayes. Hendricks asked Landry, “Coach, what's Woody doing here?” Landry said, “He's hurting. He needs help. I invited him to come down as my guest. Maybe the Lord will give me an opportunity to minister to him. You know, he's in football. That's my responsibility.” At the time, most people wanted to keep a disgraced Woody Hayes at arm's length. It was cancel culture before that phrase became popular. But Tom Landry saw an opportunity for ministry in Jesus' Name. You likely would never have been in a position to reach out to Woody Hayes. There are a lot of people you might not be able to reach, true. The question is this – who are the people God has put in your life to reach? Jesus offends our prejudices.

JESUS OFFENDS OUR PRIDE.

Almost everyone today is complimentary of Jesus. “What a good man. What an incredible ethical example. What a gifted teacher. What a great prophet.” But many of those same people dismiss the fact Jesus is God or that He died on the cross to pay for people’s sins. Most people want to admire Jesus, but many of them will then reject His claim to be the one and only way anyone can ever enter into a saving relationship with the God of the universe. By the same token, lots of people want to embrace aspects of the Christian faith, but reject or reinterpret the parts of it they don’t like. As a result, Jesus gets trivialized. Jesus is reduced to someone who can teach good values to our kids and nothing more. Jesus can provide a sort of religious veneer to my life, but not truly impact, change, or transform it in any spiritual or lasting way.

When you truly encounter Jesus, the result is something very different. You recognize you’re a broken, damaged version of what God wants. You admit you deserve eternal judgment. You acknowledge you’re way beyond some kind of weekend self-help or positive thinking seminar. You know an eternal relationship with God can never be earned or deserved through your own efforts. You just don’t have enough innate goodness or sincerity to pull it off. Jesus never claimed to die as a glorious martyr for some noble cause. None of His first followers made that claim either. No, Jesus died as their substitute and our substitute. God took our sin and transferred its guilt to Jesus. Then, He asked His Son to die for it which was the just penalty for our sin. When all of that becomes clear to you through the Holy Spirit, you realize a restored relationship with God and eternal life is yours only because of God’s grace and your trust in Jesus. Salvation and eternal life is a gift you receive or you just never get it.

Why don’t more people believe in Jesus and become His followers? Is it really because they just don’t understand who He is and what He did? Perhaps. But perhaps they understand Jesus only too well. At the end of the day, Jesus offends our pride. The cross, for example, offends our self-respect. Maybe you believe you’re a rather decent person who always means well, but the Bible says you’re actually a lost sinner very far from God. The cross offends our self-reliance. If you believe that if you just try hard enough to be good, to be thoughtful, to be sincere, or to do religious things, God will give Heaven to you, then you’re self-reliant. The cross offends our self-righteousness. If you believe your goodness or sincerity somehow impresses an infinitely holy God, that’s a rightness provided by yourself not God. Our own goodness is worthless to God. He insists on giving us Jesus’ perfect righteousness – the only kind that counts.

Some people who go to church will not be in Heaven. I’m all about the value of going to church, but it’s not a substitute for needing a Savior. I don’t know who David Rhodes is, but I like something he said. “Pride is the dandelion of the soul. Its root goes deep.... Its seeds lodge deep in the tiniest encouraging cracks. And it flourishes in good soil. The danger of pride is that it feeds on goodness.” Jesus offends people’s pride in their own goodness. Our only hope is to throw ourselves upon God’s mercy and grace (not the grace we provide ourselves), ask for His forgiveness of our sins (not our own forgiveness), and transfer our trust to Jesus forever (forsaking any trust in ourselves).

Now, I realize most everyone listening today has made that all important decision, but there are additional ways verses 1-3 of Isaiah 53 apply to us. First, let's learn to despise our own sin more and more. Every time we do or say something that grieves God's heart, it's as if we drive those nails deeper into Jesus' hands and feet. We despise our own sin every time we choose to obey Jesus. Second, let's allow our pride to get offended regularly. If Jesus is doing His work in me every day through the Holy Spirit who indwells me, my selfish, sinful pride is going to get put in its proper place regularly. My self-reliance is taking a hit. My self-sufficiency is getting smacked around. My self-righteousness is getting exposed as hopelessly inadequate yet again. You need your pride offended regularly. So do I. It actually keeps us close to Jesus. If you're a true follower of Jesus, He will offend you because He loves you.

When Pastor Wayne Cordeiro's daughter, Amy, was three years old, her pre-school held a Christmas concert for the parents. You've been to one of those, right? Every chair filled with eager parents. Every parent equipped with a camera phone or a more serious device to record the event. About 30 kids came out and filled up the risers. One teacher led them in "Joy to the World." Her guitar was seriously out of tune. Again, Amy and these kids were just three years old. They could barely speak in complete sentences yet, much less sing full measures of music. Undaunted, the teacher began her unintentional solo rendition of "Joy to the World" while the kids were far more interested in locating their parents out in the audience. "Hi, Mommy. Hi, Daddy." Amy saw her daddy and he took a picture of her. Just then one of the boys in the back began to fall off the riser. He managed to take four other classmates with him. Bang! The teacher kept singing – "joy to the world." Like all pre-school Christmas concerts, it was absolute chaos. But when the song was over, the parents gave those kids a standing ovation. More pictures were taken. They were so proud of those kids. After it was over, Wayne went outside to get some air. He chuckled to himself, thinking, "We parents just gave a standing ovation to the worst concert we've ever heard. I just took pictures of the worst concert I've ever seen. But wasn't Amy good? Yeah, she's cool!" Why on earth did Wayne and all those parents applaud their kids? It wasn't because of their performance. No, it was because his little girl or her little boy was up there. They applauded because of the reality of the relationship – not because of the excellence of the performance.

Does God love you? Yes, more than you will ever know. Is God proud of you? Yes, just like any parent is proud of his or her kid. But it has nothing to do with your performance. Instead, it has everything to do with the fact that you have an eternal relationship with Him and you're His kid. Does that hurt your pride? If so, good. Jesus loves to offend our prejudices and our pride. He'll keep doing it until we get to Heaven. If you're His follower – His child – get used to it. The Messiah will offend you.