

## **Prayer for Illumination**

Gracious God, open our ears to hear your word, our minds to comprehend your word, and our hearts to embrace your word. May this encounter with your word draw us closer to you and empower our witness in the world as disciples of Jesus Christ. Amen.

### **Isaiah 53:1-9 (NRSV)**

**pg. 836 OT, Pew Bible**

<sup>1</sup> Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? <sup>2</sup> For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. <sup>3</sup> He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.

<sup>4</sup> Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. <sup>7</sup> He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. <sup>8</sup> By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. <sup>9</sup> They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

### **Ephesians 3:7-21**

**pg. 236 NT, Pew Bible**

<sup>7</sup> Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. <sup>8</sup> Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ <sup>9</sup> and to make everyone see what is the plan of the

mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, <sup>10</sup> so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. <sup>11</sup> This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, <sup>12</sup> in whom we have access in boldness and confidence through faith in him. <sup>13</sup> I pray, therefore, that you may not lose heart over my sufferings for you; they are your glory.

<sup>14</sup> For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, <sup>15</sup> from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. <sup>16</sup> I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit <sup>17</sup> and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. <sup>18</sup> I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth <sup>19</sup> and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

<sup>20</sup> Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, <sup>21</sup> to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

## **A Cruciform Aesthetic**

Our son Matthew first became enamored with NASCAR when he was about three years old. He would see the cardboard cutouts and point-of-purchase displays featuring driver Mark Martin at the Winn-Dixie grocery store we frequented. At that time, Mark Martin was the driver of the Winn-Dixie #60 Ford Thunderbird in the Busch Grand National Series. It was then that Matt caught the NASCAR bug, and he has been interested in stock car racing ever since. So, when we were appointed to serve a church just outside of Martinsville, Virginia it was easy to satisfy Matthew's NASCAR appetite. Twice a year, for the spring and fall races, the NASCAR car haulers would come into town, and we'd drive up and down business 220 through Collinsville to see them parked at various hotels and restaurants there. Matthew found it thrilling to be a part of the buzz and excitement of a race weekend.

One of my favorite memories of Matthew was when he was about second grade. In the weeks leading up to one of the Martinsville races, the track brought the Subway 300 Winner's Circle to the Walmart in town. It was basically a flatbed truck featuring a huge Subway display peppered with checkered flags and other NASCAR accoutrements. Matthew was excited to go see it, so we loaded up the minivan and went into town. When we got the display in front of Walmart, there were several folks in line ready to climb up the steps onto the flatbed to get their picture taken in front of the winner's circle. Without hesitation, little Matthew got in line, expectantly awaiting his turn. You couldn't have wiped the grin off his face with a gigantic scouring pad. Upon ascending the stairs and standing in the winner's circle amongst all the racing regalia, Matthew took out the Accelerated Reader trophy that he had earned the previous school year from behind his back, held it up high over his head, and began jumping up and down like he had just won a race. Even the president of Martinsville Speedway Clay Campbell, who happened to be presiding over the display, found Matthew's antics highly amusing. For Matthew, it wasn't enough to just see the display, he wanted to experience what it might feel like to be a driver in the winner's circle after a hard-fought race. It was a special moment for all of us, such a great memory. For Matthew, NASCAR drivers were some of his first heroes—putting on their fire suits to get into machines that can go nearly two-hundred miles per hour, weaving in and out of tight traffic, just inches away from the other cars, roaring towards the checkered flag.

All of us most likely had childhood heroes. Growing up in East Tennessee, Daniel Boone was a regional hero for many of us. Boone's story exuded a sense of adventure, the intrepid, iconic pioneer taking up his long rifle and leading settlers through the Cumberland Gap into Kentucky, the land of my ancestors. I loved watching Fess Parker as Daniel Boone on TV, and I had a coonskin cap of my own that I would often wear when I played in the woods behind my house.

There is something deep in the human psyche that fosters within us a need for heroes. Heroes are people we look up to and often aspire to emulate. Heroes have larger than life attributes, courage in the face of danger, ingenuity when creativity becomes necessity, and inner strength when times are challenging. This

past June, for example, I thought about the men who crossed the English Channel in small Higgins boats to storm Fortress Europe on D-Day eighty-one years ago. I can't begin to imagine what that must have been like, seasick, terrified, trying to keep one's wits on a beach where there was little cover under wilting German fire. I can't remember the gentleman's name, but I could never forget his story—he was a member of Blacksburg United Methodist Church. As a young man, he was a Navy coxswain on one of those small landing craft, who somehow was able to survive four crossings to deliver troops to the beaches that day. Most of us are familiar with the story of the Bedford Boys, members of a National Guard Unit from Virginia, who were in the first wave of boats that morning. Nineteen young men from Bedford, then a small town with a population of only three-thousand people, lost their lives in their first minutes on Omaha Beach. Hence the D-Day Memorial that is near Bedford today. Our family has visited this memorial, and we found it greatly humbling and meaningful. As an amateur military historian, I highly recommend Alex Kershaw's book simply entitled, *The Bedford Boys* for more about their harrowing efforts and the effects of their sacrifice on the ethos of that small town. And no, I'm not getting a kickback from Amazon for recommending this book.

While we often look at great deeds and personal sacrifices as heroic, our culture seems to be obsessed with elevating heroes to near godlike status. Think about all the movies that have graced movie and television screens across the world involving heroes. We watch musclebound, attractive, and charismatic characters like Superman, Batman, Spiderman, The Flash, Wonder Woman, Thor, Ant Man, Black Widow, and a host of others who use their superhuman powers to take on villains who also possess great powers fighting for the future of the world in an often-cosmic struggle. Through physical and mental prowess these heroes conquer evil and save the world, evoking the praise of all who benefit from their struggle. We have many of these movies in our DVD collection at home—who doesn't like a feel-good story where the good guys win the day?! But I am also able to separate fiction from reality—and through the lenses of faith—I know not to become so enamored with the flash and awe of comic book heroes that I miss out on the beauty of the saints in our midst.

As part of the Church, disciples of a real person not a fictional character, we are called to look at things differently. We are called to see those who struggled and sacrificed for the faith before us not so much as larger-than-life heroes but rather as saints. We revere their stories, yet see their humanity, holding both their strengths and their weaknesses in a delicate tension. In our Western achievement-driven, success-oriented mindset, we look at heroes as people who know how to make things happen and shape the world according to their will. Saints, on the other hand, are often considered quaint, marginal, occupying religious spheres on the periphery of the action. We tend to desire to be heroes; but we don't often aspire to be saints. Francis Ambrosio offers these thoughts on the matter:

*For the hero, the meaning of life is honor...for the saint, the meaning of life is love.... For the hero, the goal of living is self-fulfillment, the achievement of personal excellence, and the recognition and admiration that making a signal contribution to one's society through one's achievements carries with it. For the saint, life does not so much have a goal as a purpose for which each human being is responsible; and that purpose is love: the bonds of concern and care and responsibility for one's fellow human beings carry with it.... These two paradigms—the hero and the saint—and the way of life that descends from each, are really two fundamentally distinct and genuinely different visions of human society as a whole, and even of what it means to be a human being. They are two distinct and different ways of asking the question of the meaning of life.*

The prophet Isaiah's words that we encountered this morning are often referred to as the "Song of the Suffering Servant," one of several songs that can be identified in the prophet's writing. Isaiah confronted the powers and principalities of his time by offering an alternative image of leadership. Instead of a monarch who vies for political power, extending the kingdom's glory and influence through military might and overt displays of strength, Isaiah anticipates a different kind of leader, one who brings hope and redemption not through daring means, but by being "wounded for our transgressions; crushed for our

iniquities.” Contrast this image with the images of the heroes offered to us on the big screen. Isaiah shares: “For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.” This is certainly not a description of the many heroes cast before us by the world.

We often read this passage from Isaiah during Holy Week in preparation for Good Friday and the crucifixion of Jesus. Instead of a Rocky Balboa preparing to meet an opponent in twelve rounds of pain-inflicting pugilism, we are shocked to find one who “was oppressed” and “afflicted.” “Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter.” “By a perversion of justice, he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future?” At the cross, Jesus lived all that he taught. The life of love that Jesus proclaimed in his teaching he lived in his suffering. The life of co-suffering love is the paradigm of the saint, and it is how Jesus loved and died—the beauty of the cruciform—which is the pattern of love revealed in the cross.

Now we might protest and declare that Jesus is our hero, and I completely understand what you are saying. But, if we are intent on forcing Jesus into the archetype of hero, we distort his image. In trying to make Jesus a hero, we miss the simple fact that Jesus did nothing that was conventionally heroic—at least not according to the Western ideal of heroism. The Jesus of the Gospels is not a heroic general who slaughters his enemies, but a suffering saint who forgives his enemies. It should be clear that the way of Christ is not the way of the conventional hero, because Jesus saves the world not by shedding the blood of his enemies, but by allowing his own blood to be shed in an act of redemptive love. This is the way of the saint, not the hero.

In all the political rhetoric of our time with accusations and blame and finger pointing, there is a strong temptation for us to be heroes. To boldly take a stand, gird our loins in Kevlar, grab the Gospel gun out of our closet, and become a holy crusader in the culture wars waging around us. Jesus shows us a different way.

Ultimately it is the beauty of the cross, a cruciform aesthetic that leads us toward a more authentic expression of Christian faith. In fact, beauty may just be the antidote to the current mess we have made of our world. In his groundbreaking work in the theology of beauty, Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar offers these words of wisdom:

*Love alone is credible; nothing else can be believed, and nothing else ought to be believed. This is the achievement, the “work” of faith....to believe that there is such a thing as love....and that there is nothing higher or greater than it....The first thing that must strike a non-Christian about the Christian faith is that....it is obviously too good to be true: the mystery of being, revealed as absolute love, condescending to wash his creature’s feet, and even their souls, taking upon himself all the confusion of guilt, all the God-directed hatred, all the accusations showered upon him with cudgels....all the mocking hostility....in order to pardon his creature....This is truly too much.*

The apostle Paul would describe this extravagance as “the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.” The picture of God as seen in the redemptive co-suffering love of Christ is too much in the sense that it overwhelms us in much the same way that we find a stunning sculpture, a masterpiece of music, or a majestic sunset overwhelming—it is the experience of being overawed by a transcendent beauty. This is how the Gospel is made most compelling. Our enduring icon of beauty and the standard by which we gauge the beauty of our own actions is the cruciform. The cross is a beautiful mystery—a mystery where an unexpected beauty is in the process of rescuing the world from all its ugliness. After all, if the crucifixion of Christ can be made beautiful, then there is hope that all the ugliness of the human condition can be redeemed by its beauty.