The prophecy of Isaiah speaks a word of judgment. And as we’ve seen, judgment doesn’t mean only condemnation. To ‘judge’ means to make a declaration of what is right and what is wrong. As the judge of the world, God here makes pronouncements about which world systems are right and wrong – which will be allowed to stand in the long-run, and which will surely fall. And in the midst of these large-scale judgments, the message to God’s people in this book is clear: “Shake yourself from the dust, rise up, O captive Jerusalem!” In other words, it’s time to choose your kingdom, your system. “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?”

The overall vision of Isaiah is one of great hope for the setting-right of the world. Even for a group of people that has been run into the ground, experiencing a deep brokenness. “Zion said ‘The LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.’ But can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me.” The poor have not been forgotten, and those whose hearts have been crushed will find relief. “Everyone who thirsts – come to the waters! You who have no money – come, buy, and eat!”

This is indeed a message of hope. But it’s a demanding message too. God calls people to leave one kind of kingdom and enter into a new one. The kingdom that must be abandoned is the one characterized by accumulation of resources at the expense of others and a blind compulsion to satisfy one’s own ego and desire and need for security. The process of leaving that kind of kingdom, that kind of mindset, is painful for anyone – because it inevitably means giving up some of those things we’ve placed our identity in. But there is even more to this story... for the kingdom that we’re being called into also brings a certain kind of pain.

Isaiah’s vision turns the common-sense systems of the world on their head. What he describes here as the way of righteousness, the path of God, appears to be a kind of upside-down kingdom. Instead of the powerful of the earth demonstrating their strength and superiority in order to get ahead, Isaiah describes the ‘true Servant of the LORD’ as a leader who gives up all power, comfort, and security... and only then is given honor and respect. This is the new template, the new format for life. Embracing weakness, suffering, and even death rather than scrambling for self-promotion. Enforcing justice for the world not through power, but through humility. Speaking as this ‘Suffering Servant,’ Isaiah says: “I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.” It seems backwards, like it could never really work in the real world. But this is the vision. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are my ways your ways, says the LORD.”

This Suffering Servant figure in Isaiah’s prophecy can be legitimately interpreted in a variety of ways... sometimes it appears that Isaiah is describing himself as this servant-leader. Sometimes it appears that he is idealistically referring to the people of Israel as whole. And, of course, in the Christian tradition it is common to look at this text and interpret it as a description of the life and ministry of Jesus, the Christ. And in a sense, all of these are true. What Isaiah is doing here is setting up a counter-example to compare with the corrupt kind of rulers that he has been speaking against in this book. He has already declared what is not acceptable in God’s eyes. And now, in the figure of the Suffering Servant, he is showing us the positive example. This is the one who has the real power to bring the people back to their true role in the world. This is the person who does not lead from a position of privilege and security, but rather “bears the iniquities of the people.” This is the way forward, and it applies to Isaiah, Israel, and Jesus (all of the above). It is the life and message of Isaiah as a prophet of God, it is the original calling and vocation of the nation of Israel as a whole, and it is the role that was most perfectly completed in the life of Jesus.
“He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth.”

“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.”

“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.”

What an utterly weak person. Who would choose this path for themselves? And yet, in the plans of God for this world, this is exactly the path of victory. God says of this Servant: “Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong: because he poured himself out to death.”

“See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high. Just as there were many who were astonished at him—so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals—so he shall startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him.”

And whether you view this Suffering Servant as Isaiah, Israel, or Jesus – in any case, the role of the Servant was never designed exclusively for that person only. The Servant stands as a model of God’s kingdom way, and as such is the new paradigm for the lives of all who follow God’s ways. “The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous.” This standard of humility and self-sacrificing leadership may produce some understandable fear and uncertainty for God’s people. What if we’re wrong? What if we lay down our lives only to find that there is no one there to catch our fall? In the end, this is the central question of faith itself. Can we move forward, based on only the promise? “Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed; do not be discouraged, for you will not suffer disgrace.”

Finally, in a way that we’ve come to expect from Isaiah, we find in these chapters a stunning expansion of the vision for a restored world. No longer only a vision for one people group, this Suffering Servant provides a new paradigm and hope for all people. This is a world-wide movement of returning to the way of the LORD and receiving the promises for God’s future. The LORD says to the Servant: “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

Amen.