

“An Unexpected King”

March 27, 2022

What kind of leaders do you like? When it comes to coaches, bosses, political leaders, community leaders, what kind of leaders are you drawn to? Don't shout it out. Gonna need some self-control on no political shoutouts this morning.

- Some like the strong, take-charge, decisive type. Sharp. Always a couple steps ahead. Sees solutions to problems while everyone else is still trying to wrap their head around the problems.
- Others prefer the really caring, compassionate leader. Make you feel so seen and heard. Their wisdom is delivered with the perfect bedside manner.
- Still others love the fun leader. Creative. Collaborative. Helps everyone contribute their best, so the sum of the parts is better than what any one person could have offered.

Zelensky: I'll give you a recent example. I know almost nothing about the political history of Eastern Europe or Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. He's been thrust into the public view amidst the Russian invasion in Ukraine. And to me, he seems hard not to like.

- Here he is with his family. Looks like a fun dad, right?
- Before politics, Zelensky had a career as a comedian and actor. When interviewed about his move to politics, he said I want *“to bring professional, decent people to power.”* To me, that's a good answer.
- And now his country is at war, and it turns out the comedian has a serious heroic streak. When America offered him a ride out of Kyiv, his response was, *“The fight is here. I need ammunition, not a ride.”*

Good dad, comedian turned courageous, sacrificial hero... knowing none of the most essential facts about him, that seems like my kind of leader.



Ok, so we're talking about leaders. Here's why: ***Jesus isn't the leader people expect. But, He's always the leader we need.***

Let me set up our new series and then we'll unpack what I mean by that.

New Series: Suffering Servant. Taking a break from Acts. We'll come back for part 2 in the fall. This series will take us from Serve the City Weekend to Easter Weekend. Perfect bookends as we set our minds on Jesus. Who He is. What kind of leader He is. What kind of life does He call us to?

The term “suffering servant” comes from 4 servant songs or poems found toward the end of Isaiah. These passages describe a servant of God... an *ebed Yahweh* in the Hebrew.

And at the time Isaiah was written, the Suffering Servant was a bit of a cloudy figure. Sometimes, the servant seems to be the nation of Israel. In other passages, He appears to be a coming Messiah. As well, the Servant is described in both really high and really low ways that seem paradoxical:

In some passages the Suffering Servant is high and exalted:

Isaiah 42:1 *Behold 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.*

Isaiah 42:4 - *He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth;*

Isaiah 49:6 - *... I will make you as a light for the nations, that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.*

Isaiah 52:13 - *“He shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted.*

That sounds like a good leader. High and lifted up. Bringing justice and salvation to the nations. That's the kind of leader I can get behind.

But in others passages, the Suffering Servant is described as a lowly servant who suffers terribly:

Isaiah 50:6 - *I gave My back to those who strike, and My cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not My face from disgrace and spitting.*

Isaiah 52:14 - *His appearance was marred beyond human semblance,*

Isaiah 53:4 - *Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.*

Isaiah 53:7 - *He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, ... like a lamb that is led to the slaughter;*

Now for us with the gift of hindsight, it's fairly clear to see that the servant songs prophesy Jesus. The life He lived in human flesh suffering... dying in our place... followed by His resurrection and exaltation. Jesus is both high and lifted up, and the lamb led to slaughter. He is claiming victory over sin and death. He is bringing salvation and justice to the nations...

But, the way He accomplishes it was not what God's people expected. They expected a King riding a warhorse. A political champion to overthrow their oppressors and unite their nation. They expected someone who would end and heal their suffering here and now.

Jesus wasn't the leader they expected.

And it wasn't just them. The way Jesus lived was inverted from the standard way human leaders accomplish things. Like we can just look at one specific example from Isaiah 53:

Isaiah 53:2 - *He had no form or majesty that we should look at Him, and no beauty that we should desire Him.*

Nothing attractive physically that made humans think, "Wow. That guy is successful. He's impressive. I want to be like him."

If you've been around for a minute, ya'll know I love to point this out, but if you grew up around church, there's a good chance you saw some of this artwork.

First picture - Here we have Jesus as a Fabio-esque model with shimmering, I Can't Believe It's Not Butter, conditioned hair.

Next picture - Have you found in your studies yet that Jesus was actually one of the swashbuckling pirates on the Black Pearl with Captain Jack Sparrow?

Next one - this is just a painting of Kurt Russell in a robe with some kids.

- Amongst the many problems with these paintings, high amongst them being Jesus' very low melanin count for a Middle Eastern man... maybe the biggest is that these artists worked so hard to make Him attractive. Even successful and rich looking.

But, the Scriptures are clear: Jesus grew up working class poor. Blue collar.

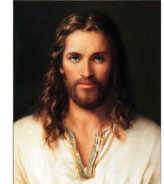
Lived as a homeless itinerant minister. No beauty that we should desire Him.

Which is the opposite of leaders we tend to be drawn to. Statistically speaking, we are drawn to attractive leaders. Impressive and successful looking.

1960 election - A political example ya'll may have learned about in history. In 1960, television played the first major role in a US presidential election. The debates between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon were aired on television.

Those who listened on the radio said Nixon was the clear winner. But on TV, Nixon had lost significant weight after a knee injury. He also refused to wear makeup on camera. So, he looked old, tired, and gaunt in a baggy suit.

Meanwhile, JFK had been campaigning in Southern California. He had a nice tan. He was young and fit. So, even though the radio-listeners confirmed Nixon won the *content* of the debate, JFK won the physical looks aspect of the debate. And what do you know, JFK won the election.



→ And it's more than just physical beauty. It's all of it. We're drawn to attractive, successful leaders who look like winners. Beautiful families. Have you ever wondered why?

I'd argue it's because inherently when we think about what kind of leaders we prefer... we can't help but ask, "Who's going to help me climb the ladder to the type of life I want?" "Who's going to help me get where I'm trying to go?"

However you ask it, this is what we ask instinctively:

- "Which leader is going to help our country and the world be more diplomatic and stable?" "Who will help us be strong and powerful?" "Which leader will make gas prices go down and my retirement go up?" Or flip the arena: "Which Coach will lead us to a championship?" or "Well sure that matters, but which coach is going to do it in the right way?"

We are looking for leaders who will serve our goals. Leaders who will deliver to us our desires. Leaders who will help us feel a certain kind of hope; a kind of strength; a kind of pride about ourselves and our groups.

And in all kinds of different ways, people try to do this with Jesus.

Prosperity Jesus - So I'll point at an easy, low-hanging fruit example. The *prosperity gospel* is one of the most overt plays in this direction. Ministers who say, "Jesus is the key to success. If you want to be wealthy and healthy, follow Jesus. He'll give you your wildest dreams."

Now my guess is that the majority of you recognize and reject that for the heresy it is.

And my guess is also that many of us in the room are more susceptible to a much tamer, harder to notice version ... what you could call "*prosperity gospel lite*."

In this version, people just subtly insinuate, if you're a good, faithful Christian, your life will probably go pretty well. You'll likely get a good spouse. And a good job. You won't have very bad problems. And if you aren't aware that this is how you're approaching Jesus, it can lead to all kinds of bitterness if/when your life doesn't go how you hoped.

Political Jesus - Both primary American political parties co-opt Jesus to say, "If Jesus were alive today, he'd be a big fan of our party... and our insatiable thirst for political gamesmanship and power... Err... I mean our values." When the reality is, whenever Jesus was offered political power while here on earth, He rejected it wholesale.

When Jesus is tempted by Satan, He is offered power and worship in all the nations of the world... a shortcut to what He absolutely deserves. And Jesus says, no, there will be no shortcut to my glory. It comes on the far side of the cross.

My favorite example is **John 6:15**, that says, "*Perceiving then that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by Himself.*"

Jesus perceives the crowd wants to take Him by force to make Him their political king, and He Jesus jukes His way straight through the crowd. Look at me, I'm on a mountain.

He refuses to be coerced into any political powerplay.

→ The problem with all of these is that they make our relationship with Jesus transactional.

Jesus, I'll give you my vote, and then You help me climb up the political ladder to have more power or at least the policies that I think will fix this place.

Jesus, I'll give you my money and obedience, and then You help me climb the economic ladder, the success ladder, the nice, easy life ladder to live in comfort and wealth here and now.

This is what all leaders promise. I'll help you climb. And in this way, they play to our inner desires that say, "I want to climb." "Who will help me climb?"

And Jesus is just not interested in climbing.

Everyone else is climbing. While Jesus is descending.

Because Jesus is not the leader we expect.

I love the example of this in **Mark 10**. Jesus' disciples James and John ask Jesus, can we sit at your right hand and your left hand in your kingdom? And Jesus says, "Boys, you have no idea what you're asking for. Can you drink the cup I'm going to drink?" In the garden of Gethsemane, we get clarity that the cup Jesus is referring to is the suffering of the cross. The cup of God's wrath poured out on the Suffering Servant for our sin. And He cryptically tells them, you will drink the cup I'm going to drink, but I can't give you what you're asking for.

They wanted Jesus to help them climb to positions of power. Jesus says no, I'm going to call you to follow me in descending to serve others.

He's not the leader they expected.

In his letter written from prison to the church in Philippi in the book of Philippians that we studied together last summer, Paul unpacks Jesus' descension in an incredible way:

Philippians 2:5-8 *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

He just keeps descending lower and lower. Look at all of this in the passage. Jesus, God's Son...

... descends to take on human form. "*Born in the likeness of men.*" How humiliating! Divinity itself subjected to wrinkles. Headaches. The yelp of a stubbed toe in the middle of the night. An aching lower back after just a few hours of yard work for one of our Serve the City partners.

... And not just any human form, Jesus is born to an impoverished couple... unwed when He was conceived. He lives His whole upbringing in a small town mired in family scandal.

... And then He descends further, *taking the form of a servant*. As an itinerant, homeless minister, he depends on the generosity of strangers for basic provisions. In his last hours before His death, he bends down to take a water bowl and wash the dirt off His disciples' feet. His disciples, who are always screwing up... rarely understand what He's saying or doing. Fall asleep on the job. Fight about who is the greatest. All about to abandon Him. One about to sell Him out for blood money. And He knows it. He picks up the servant's towel anyway. He descends to wash *even* Judas' feet.

... And then He descends further. "*Obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*"

One of the perks of being God is you don't have to die.

It's a perk that most human leaders try to take advantage of.

Charles Colson - "*All through human history, as far back as recorded time and doubtless before, kings, princes, tribal chiefs, presidents, and dictators have sent their subjects into battle to die for them. Only once in human history has a king not sent his subjects to die for him, but instead, died for his subjects.*" Jesus descends to human death. Not just any death. The worst, most torturous death in human history. A criminal's death. A despicable death.

I don't know what kind of leaders you're drawn to. But, no one's looking for this guy. No human leaders run on this platform. Try to imagine Jesus at a political rally:

"I'm gonna be around for ~3 years. I'll take no political office. I'll give My life away in descending lower than any human parent would deem an acceptable outcome for their child's life... And in the end I'll die a shameful criminal's death on a cross... and if you want to be on my team, I'm going to call you to join Me in going that direction. To pick up your cross and follow Me. To give your life away to serve those who have nothing to offer you back. To lay down your preferences in glad obedience to Father God."

"I have no transactional offer where you give me a little and I give you back some stuff you want. Here's

My offer: I'll give you everything you need. You do nothing whatsoever to deserve it or earn it. So, I owe you nothing and I demand everything from you. Nothing more, nothing less."

Jesus is absolutely not the leader we expect. But, He's the leader we need.

Let me try to wrap all of that up with two concluding thoughts:

1.) I hope no one has lied to you about what kind of leader the Suffering Servant is, or what He offers.

I have no idea how your life will go. My 22 years walking with Jesus has been both more wonderful than I could have imagined, and more painful than I could have feared.

He has blessed me with gifts I never knew I needed. He has healed me in deeper ways than I knew to even ask for ... and, He has not finished some parts of what I've been praying for and begging Him for, for years.

Most important of all, **He has never and will never abandon me.** No matter how many times I fail. No matter how I struggle. No matter how many times I abandon Him and His way of life.

The greatness of a Suffering Servant who descends... is that He descended FOR YOU.

You with all your weakness.

You with all your failures. You with all your shame.

The hidden thing you did this last Thursday that you don't want anyone to know about. He knows. And He came. And He suffered. To serve you. To love you. To redeem you. To wash you.

You with all your pride that resists admitting your need for help.

He came for sinners exactly like you and I.

He is not the leader we expected, but He is absolutely the Savior that we need.

I cannot predict how your life will go. But, I know that the Suffering Servant is not interested in bowing to your whims. He already bowed so low to take on all of our sin.

And this is enough. More than enough. Unbelievable grace.

And on top of that, what He offers us that is so much better than a nice, easy life... is He offers us Himself. He offers to walk through the highs and lows with you.

He's not the leader we expected. He's absolutely the one we need.

→ Ok, that's my first concluding point for us this morning. Secondly:

2.) Jesus' life of descending is the pattern and posture He calls His followers to take.

Luke 14:27 "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple."

I love that God's Spirit orchestrated our church calendar such that this series started on Serve the City Weekend. 350-400 of our members serving the least of these in our city. Humble work. Lots of working in the dirt. Sweaty work. Behind-the-scenes work. Outside of this plug right now... and a fun recap video next week, most of you will never get any credit for your hours of service this weekend. Not here on earth anyway.

We will be forgotten. But our few hours of work... in as much as it painted the picture of Jesus ... Jesus who is descending to serve, Jesus who is descending to love, Jesus who is descending to dignify the least of these: the marginalized, the hurting, the left out in our society... in as much as our few hours of service contributed to painting a beautiful and accurate picture of our Suffering Servant King Jesus... that is eternal work that will never be taken away.

You're contributing to a kingdom that cannot be shaken.
Not by climbing. But, by joining Jesus in descending.

You're joining the leader who is not always what we expect... but is always what we need.

Serve the City is a great weekend, and it's just a baby step into a life of serving.

- So, I love that we have individuals and LifeGroups who sponsor Epworth cottages year round.
- And, I love that a normal rhythm in many of our LifeGroups is to host a meal train anytime someone in their world is hurting, in the hospital, has a newborn, is suffering loss or grief.
- I love the men I know who mentor young men in our church whose dads are out of the picture.
- And, in a more extreme example, it's my honor to brag on my friend, **Mollie**. She's currently fostering her second infant as a single woman in our church family.
 - Lifegroup and people in her life have come around to support her both times.
 - And she and her baby, Messiah, were in the hospital this past week for brain surgery.
 - Listen, Mollie is bringing pain into her life she doesn't have to.
 - She's spending money in a sacrificial way she doesn't have to.

And, it's absolutely beautiful. Because it resounds with the glory of a Servant King, Son of God who descended for us.

The deepest joy and peace, beyond human understanding, is found here... descending with Jesus to give your life away. Our culture is losing almost any concept of this, but the truth is that life is found by dying to yourself...not centering on yourself. Not by demanding your way, your truth, your life. But, dying to yourself and giving yourself to The Way, the Truth, The Life. The Suffering Servant Jesus.

Let's Pray.