

“Hidden in Plain Sight”

Isaiah 42:1-4, 49:1-7, 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12; Luke 4:16-21 ¹

If you’ve seen this week’s *Laptop*, one of the things I recounted there was the story of my first glimpse of the Mercury Mariner I’m now driving. I won’t retell the whole thing, but the short version is that I was looking for this vehicle to replace Jill’s current Mariner.

I had spent the day before Thanksgiving driving all over northern Virginia looking at potential vehicles, and I arrived at this dealership after dark and after they had closed for the holiday. I drove through their expansive lots, but didn’t see an area for used cars, and I couldn’t find the particular car I wanted to see.

After touring the lots, I offered a short prayer: “Lord, I can’t find this car, and I don’t know what to do. If you want me to see this car, you’re going to have to help me.” Literally *within ten seconds*, I had found the car. The truth of the matter is that I’d already driven past the car at least once, but hadn’t seen it.

With respect to me, at least, the car was “hidden in plain sight”; and one of the few lines I remember from reading Sherlock Holmes as a youth was his principle that “If you want to hide something, hide it in plain sight.”

We humans are often quite interested in hiding things. The news is filled with accounts of hidden streams of dark money held by famous people in offshore accounts. Our military is preoccupied with developing “stealth” aircraft, ships, and equipment. And one of the more famous tricks in the Harry Potter stories has to do with the wearing of “invisibility cloaks” whereby one might “hide in plain sight.”²

Another way we hide things “in plain sight” is to develop plot lines for books and movies in which the entire story is turned on its head by new revelations in the final moments of the film or novel.³ Once we know the surprise ending, we become able to see many ways in which that reality has been hidden in plain sight all along.

The idea of hiding crucial realities “in plain sight” has theological implications, as well. In C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the first book in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the climactic scene occurs when Aslan, the Christ figure, is resurrected from death after having been killed on an altar known as “the Stone Table.”

Aslan has allowed himself to be killed by the White Witch in order to secure redemption for Edmund, a boy who has betrayed his brother, sisters, and friends. When the children joyously ask Aslan what his resurrection means, he replies, “It means that though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor’s stead,

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on December 3, 2017. The first Sunday of Advent.

² Recent news accounts suggest that such “invisibility” may in fact be possible in non-visible electromagnetic spectra.

³ <http://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/film-tv/g4726/best-film-plot-twists/?slide=1>;
<http://www.imdb.com/list/ls052316397/>

the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backward.”⁴ This is actually a crucial piece of information that is “hidden in plain sight” in the Bible itself.

Genesis 3 gives the account of the entrance of Sin into Creation—Adam and Eve’s temptation and fall—and it also reports God’s announcement of the consequences of that Sin. When God announced judgment to the serpent, who had tempted Adam and Eve into Sin, God said, “*I will put hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. **He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel***” (Genesis 3:15).

Revelation 12:9 identifies this serpent as “*the great dragon, the ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the one who deceives the whole world.*” And Genesis 3:15 tells us that, while Satan will wound “the seed of the woman,” the Seed will destroy the Deceiver.

The word, “seed,” is usually plural, denoting “descendants.” But in Genesis 3:15, the word is masculine, singular. Genesis 3:15 is God’s first “hiding in plain sight” of the Redeemer who will come, the “*Lamb slain before the foundation of the world*” (Revelation 13:8)—the deeper magic from before the dawn of time.

This morning we will consider some of the more prominent clues “hidden in plain sight” that become clear when we read them in light of Jesus’ Crucifixion and Resurrection; but Lewis’s account of the Stone Table helps us to see a critical piece of the puzzle. The White Witch would never have killed Aslan if she had known “the deeper magic from beyond the dawn of time.”

Had the White Witch—the Satan figure in these stories—known that, by killing Aslan, the innocent and willing victim who died in the traitor’s place, she would set in motion the cosmic processes that would bring about her own destruction, she would never have killed him. And, had Satan and the rebel angels in league with him, known that by killing Jesus—the innocent and willing victim who died *in our place*, they would set in motion the cosmic processes that would bring about their own destruction, they would never have seen to it that Jesus was killed, and our redemption would not have been accomplished.⁵

It is probably for this reason that God’s plan to invade space and time in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, fully God and fully human, and to sacrifice God’s own person on our behalf, so that evil might be forever undone, is “hidden in plain sight” in the Older Testament. Had the plan been obvious, the plan would have failed.

God’s plan, foreshadowed in Genesis 3:15, becomes clearer as the Older Testament develops. Jeremiah spoke about a “new covenant” that would replace the Mosaic covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34). Zechariah told Jerusalem to rejoice, because “*your King is coming to you; he is righteous and victorious, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey*” (Zechariah 9:9), as Jesus did. But the clearest signs came through the prophet Isaiah.

In the text from Luke that we read this morning, Jesus read from Isaiah 61:1-2, where it is written that “*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor*” (Luke 4:18-19). And then Jesus said, “**Today, as you listen, this Scripture has been fulfilled.**”

⁴ Lewis, C. S. *The Chronicles of Narnia Complete 7-Book Collection with Bonus Book: Boxen* (Kindle Locations 4000-4003). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

⁵ This point is made in much greater detail by Michael Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Lexham Press, 2015).

When Jesus said this, He was making a clear claim to be God's Messiah, but only for those "who had ears to hear and eyes to see." It is possible to understand Isaiah's text differently, and even today, the *Jewish Study Bible* notes that "the identity of the speaker in these verses is hotly debated."⁶

This is also true for what are known as Isaiah's "Servant Songs," which are in fact our primary focus this morning. You have these passages as an insert in your order of worship, and while, for Christians, Jesus fairly leaps out of these passages, for most Jewish people, this is most certainly not the case.⁷

We see Jesus in these passages, but He is "hidden in plain sight." There are other ways to understand the texts, and, as the Apostle Paul put it, "*still today, whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their hearts, but whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is removed*" (2 Corinthians 3:15-16). Let's look at each of the four Servant Songs very briefly:

Servant Song #1: ¹ *"This is my servant; I strengthen him, this is my chosen one; I delight in him. I have put my Spirit on him; he will bring justice to the nations. ² He will not cry out or shout or make his voice heard in the streets. ³ He will not break a bruised reed, and he will not put out a smoldering wick; he will faithfully bring justice. ⁴ He will not grow weak or be discouraged until he has established justice on earth. The coasts and islands will wait for his instruction."*

The first thing to notice in Song #1 is that the Servant is masculine, singular, and that we have in this text both Father, Son, and Spirit. We see the Servant doing things here that Israel never did and has not done, and things that Isaiah never did.⁸ The Servant is filled with God's Spirit, brings justice to the whole earth, and is amazingly strong, yet also compassionate. Jesus did all these things.

Servant Song #2: ¹ *Coasts and islands, listen to me; distant peoples, pay attention. **The LORD called me before I was born. He named me while I was in my mother's womb.** ² He made my words like a sharp sword; he hid me in the shadow of his hand. He made me like a sharpened arrow; he hid me in his quiver. ³ He said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." ⁴ But I myself said: **I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and futility; yet my vindication is with the LORD, and my reward is with my God.** ⁵ And now, says the LORD, who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him so that Israel might be gathered to him; **for I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and my God is my strength—⁶ he says, "It is not enough for you to be my servant raising up the tribes of Jacob and restoring the protected ones of Israel. I will also make you a light for the nations, to be my salvation to the ends of the earth."** ⁷ This is what the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel, his Holy One, **says to one who is despised, to one abhorred by people, to a servant of rulers: "Kings will see, princes will stand up, and they will all bow down because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel—and he has chosen you."***

In the Second Song, we see that the Servant was called, chosen, and named before He was born, that He will be a powerful speaker, and that He will appear to fail in His mission. All

⁶ *The Jewish Study Bible*, Jewish Publication Society, TANAKH Translation (Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁷ For an excellent argument for the unity of Isaiah (as opposed to Deutero- or Trito-Isaiah), see Christopher Seitz, "The Book of Isaiah 40-66: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in volume 6 of *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Abingdon, 2001). The "Servant Songs" were popularized by Bernhard Duhm's commentary on Isaiah in 1892.

⁸ See Isaiah 26:17-18, 30:9-11.

of this was true of Jesus. We see that the Servant's call will be for Israel to return to God, but His invitation will also be to all nations. We see that the Servant will be despised and abhorred, as Jesus was in His crucifixion, but that He will also receive the worship and honor of all nations, as Jesus will when the New Creation comes (cp. Revelation 4-5).

Servant Song #3: ⁴ *The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of those who are instructed to know how to sustain the weary with a word. He awakens me each morning; he awakens my ear to listen like those being instructed.* ⁵ *The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious; I did not turn back.* ⁶ ***I gave my back to those who beat me, and my cheeks to those who tore out my beard. I did not hide my face from scorn and spitting.*** ⁷ *The Lord GOD will help me; therefore I have not been humiliated; therefore **I have set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame.*** ⁸ ***The one who vindicates me is near; who will contend with me? Let us confront each other. Who has a case against me? Let him come near me!*** ⁹ *In truth, the Lord GOD will help me; who will condemn me? Indeed, all of them will wear out like a garment; a moth will devour them.* ¹⁰ *Who among you fears the LORD and listens to his servant? Who among you walks in darkness, and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the LORD; let him lean on his God.*

The third Servant Song notes once more that the Servant be a skillful and compassionate speaker. Jesus' humiliation prior to His Crucifixion is described, as well as His confidence that God will vindicate His sacrifice.

Servant Song #4: ¹³ *See, my servant will be successful; he will be raised and lifted up and greatly exalted.* ¹⁴ ***Just as many were appalled at you—his appearance was so disfigured that he did not look like a man, and his form did not resemble a human being—*** ¹⁵ *so he will sprinkle many nations. Kings will shut their mouths because of him, for they will see what had not been told them, and they will understand what they had not heard.*

¹ *Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?* ² *He grew up before him like a young plant and like a root out of dry ground. **He didn't have an impressive form or majesty that we should look at him, no appearance that we should desire him.*** ³ ***He was despised and rejected by men, a man of suffering who knew what sickness was. He was like someone people turned away from; he was despised, and we didn't value him.***

⁴ ***Yet he himself bore our sicknesses, and he carried our pains; but we in turn regarded him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.*** ⁵ ***But he was pierced because of our rebellion, crushed because of our iniquities; punishment for our peace was on him, and we are healed by his wounds.*** ⁶ ***We all went astray like sheep; we all have turned to our own way; and the LORD has punished him for the iniquity of us all.***

⁷ *He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth. Like a lamb led to the slaughter and like a sheep silent before her shearers, he did not open his mouth.* ⁸ *He was taken away because of oppression and judgment; and who considered his fate? For he was cut off from the land of the living; he was struck because of my people's rebellion.* ⁹ ***He was assigned a grave with the wicked, but he was with a rich man at his death, because he had done no violence and had not spoken deceitfully.***

¹⁰ *Yet the LORD was pleased to crush him severely. When you make him a guilt offering, he will see his seed, he will prolong his days, and by his hand, the LORD's pleasure will be accomplished.* ¹¹ ***After his anguish, he will see light and be satisfied. By his knowledge, my righteous servant will justify many, and he will carry their iniquities.*** ¹² *Therefore I will give him the many as a portion, and he will receive the mighty as spoil, because **he willingly submitted to***

death, and was counted among the rebels; yet he bore the sin of many and interceded for the rebels.

The fourth, and by far the longest, Servant Song, is also the most specifically descriptive of Jesus' suffering and redemption. The fourth Song emphasizes the brutality of Jesus' treatment during His trial and Crucifixion. His suffering, disfigurement, and rejection are foretold, and the fact that His suffering was for our benefit and salvation is repeatedly emphasized. The facts that He will be pierced and buried in a rich man's tomb are announced, as is the fact that He will be satisfied when our redemption has been secured (Hebrews 12:2).

The New Living Translation puts Isaiah 53:11 like this: "*When he sees all that is accomplished by his anguish, he will be satisfied. And because of his experience, my righteous servant will make it possible for many to be counted righteous, for he will bear all their sins.*"⁹

My friends, God's purpose of love *has always been to adopt us into his own family*. But our Sin and rebellion created an impenetrable barrier to the achievement of that purpose, *causing us to live in this world without God and without hope*. So God Himself, in the person of Jesus Christ, *has broken down the wall of hostility that used to separate us*, making it possible for us to go Home again (Ephesians 1:5, 2:12, 14).

This glorious Good News is only visible in retrospect, only as we come to faith in Jesus as this promised Servant. Like stained glass windows that appear dull and colorless from the outside, but are radiant and spectacular from the inside, so the identity of God's Servant was hidden in plain sight. But once the writers of the New Testament saw this "from the inside," they were quick to see that Isaiah's Servant had announced Jesus' birth centuries before He came.¹⁰

As our text from Luke shows, Jesus applied these passages to Himself, but He usually did so in a guarded way.¹¹ Jesus' favorite designation for Himself was "the Son of Man," which was a Messianic title, but it would only have been obvious to those who knew well the prophecy of Daniel.¹² He was "hiding in plain sight."

About a decade ago, I helped to plant some churches in Malawi, in the very areas where David Livingstone first took the Good News of Jesus to southern Africa. One of the traditions Livingstone found himself obligated to observe was that at each new boundary of tribal lands, he had to meet the chief whose land he wished to enter, and spread out his belongings on the ground. The tradition was that the chief would take something of Livingstone's that he wanted, and then give Livingstone something of his own in return. After this exchange was made, entrance to this new territory would be granted.

⁹ Hebrews takes this a step farther when it tells us that Jesus, the One of whom Isaiah spoke, "*was willing to die a shameful death on the cross because of the joy he knew would be his afterward*" (Hebrews 12:2). And what did Jesus, Creator and Sustainer of all that is, gain by the cross that He would not have had otherwise? . . . only one thing: the possibility of spending eternity with you.

¹⁰ See, for example, Matthew 8:17, 12:17-21; John 12:38; Acts 8:30-35, 26:23. There is, in fact, not a single expression in the third and fourth Servant Songs that necessitates, or even suggests that the Servant is other than one individual, nor is there anything here that could not apply to Jesus. Further, there is no other place in the Older Testament, aside from Isaiah 53 and Genesis 3, that suggests that the Servant dies as an atoning sacrifice for human sin. These truths are hidden in plain sight.

¹¹ Matthew 23:63-64; Mark 1:14-15, 8:27-33; Luke 11:20, 13:33, 22:67-68. See also John 10:30, 13:19, 14:9.

¹² Daniel 7:13-14; Matthew 26:63-65; Acts 7:56.

Livingstone didn't have much, but on one such occasion he spread out his clothes, his books, his watch, and even his goat, which he brought with him for milk because of chronic digestive troubles. To Livingstone's dismay, the chief took the goat, giving him in return a carved stick that looked like a walking stick.

Livingstone was quite put out over this, and he began to complain to God about losing his goat for a "stupid walking stick." One of the local men, noting Livingstone's displeasure, told him, "That is not a walking stick. It is the king's own scepter, and with it you will gain entrance to every village in our country." The gift was enormous, but it was "hidden in plain sight."¹³

My friends, as we enter this Advent Season, we are blessed indeed to know Him to whom God's "hidden" signs point. We know Him who is our Redemption, our Savior, our Counselor, and our Hope, and it is right that we celebrate His coming.

But for many of those we know and encounter, Jesus the Messiah, God's Anointed Savior, is still hidden in plain sight. Many of our neighbors will go through the motions of Xmas, having no idea at all about CHRISTmas.

Keep your eyes open. Watch for those who wander in Darkness, and tell the Good News!!!

¹³ Robert Lewis and Wayne Cordeiro, *The Culture Shift* (Jossey-Bass, 2005), pp. 1-2.