

A poker face. A "face like flint." That's how Isaiah describes his own mysterious character who appears in the second of his famous Servant Songs. *I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. ... I have set my face like flint* (50:7).

The secret of his quiet strength? Unlike Eastwood's rugged loner, who depends entirely on his own gritty masculinity, the Suffering Servant draws his strength from beyond himself: *I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near* (50:7).

The Hebrew word for "vindicate" is closely related to the word for "righteousness." A vindicator, in this sense, is not simply one who swoops in and plucks the victim out of a dangerous situation; the vindicator confirms that the victim is righteous and has been suffering unjustly.

That's why a poker face or a "face like flint" is so important to Isaiah's Suffering Servant. It's important to him that he not be put to shame, that he be vindicated, and for that reason he absorbs his enemies' abuse stoically. The Suffering Servant desires this vindication not only for his own sake, but also for the sake of the one he serves. The Suffering Servant knows his suffering is not just a personal ordeal: it is also a public witness.

Ancient Israel was what the sociologists call an "honor-shame society." In the world of the Bible and in traditional Middle Eastern societies honor and shame are social values; they determine a person's identity and social status. Honor is a person's claim to self-worth. Honor is a person's public reputation which constitutes his or her identity, and is jealously guarded and protected. If one is unable to maintain that honor, or if one's peers do not acknowledge the claim to self-worth, then the person is shamed, dishonored and disgraced. Shame is often used by the family or society to restore a person who has little or no concern for honor or reputation.

Honor, in such a society, is both individual and collective. Individually, a person makes a claim to honor which is affirmed or denied by their peers according to their own past and present behavior. But that person also shares in and commits individual honor to the collective honor of the family, the village, the class, the state or some other group to which he or she belongs. An honorable person dignifies their family or village; a shameless person disgraces their family or village or state.

The Suffering Servant sets his face like flint because there is more at stake than his own inner feelings and individual sense of honor. He knows that, if he is shamed, his people will be shamed along with him. It's important that he stand firm and not crack, because if he fails it that will bring dishonor not only upon him, but also upon his master.

A parallel may be found in God's word to Ezekiel, a prophet who also ran into opposition and suffered persecution: *See, I have made your face hard against their faces, and your forehead hard against their foreheads. Like the hardest stone, harder than flint, I have made your forehead; do not fear them or be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house* (3:8-9).

Christian minds have long seen this Servant Song as evoking the passion of Jesus. Christ's decision to "set his face to go to Jerusalem" - knowing the opposition he would encounter there - may have been the moment when Jesus first assumed a face like flint. Later, Jesus stands stone-faced before Pilate, giving only the briefest of answers to the governor's questions, and by his very silence declaring himself to be the equal (or more than the equal) of the scheming politician. Pilate's subsequent failure to break the Galilean's resolve backfires, bringing shame not upon his bedraggled prisoner, but upon himself and his government.

As with Isaiah's Suffering Servant, Jesus' deliverance, too, is near. As humiliating and shaming as his experience in Pilate's courtyard and on the cross may be, it will soon be forgotten on Easter morning. His triumph over his persecutors will be complete.

The apostle Paul uses language evocative of similar stoic resolve in Romans 8. Christian martyrs, he says, can likewise set their faces like flint, because their loving and powerful master can be counted upon to testify for them in the only court that matters: *Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us* (8:33-34).

But there is a key difference between the "face like flint" of a Clint Eastwood movie hero and that of Isaiah's Suffering Servant. Isaiah's servant is no loner! He is keenly aware that he remains in community, even as he suffers on his own. The honor he seeks to preserve is that of his people. Most important to him is the awareness that his master's vindication of him is near.

The Suffering Servant's face of flint is no testosterone-charged display of manliness: it's suffering for a noble purpose. The Suffering Servant knows others are looking on, and he knows that the manner in which he endures his ordeal will reflect well on his master and poorly on his oppressors.

A modern-day example of a Suffering Servant with a “face like flint” might be the late Nelson Mandela, the hero of the South African liberation movement. Like Isaiah’s Suffering Servant, Mandela was arrested and made to endure harsh punishment. Throughout his 28 long years in prison – the longest stretch on the remote Robben Island – the *apartheid* state sought to break him. It sought to make him admit its superior power. Mandela quietly resisted them at every turn. The establishment’s efforts to shame their most famous prisoner ultimately failed, reflecting shame back upon them.

Of great importance to Mandela was his awareness that, even in the island fortress of his prison cell, he was still a part of a larger community. He knew his sufferings were about far more than one man’s pain and heartache. He knew he was suffering for a higher purpose.

Jesus assumed a “face like flint” when he turned his face toward Jerusalem, knowing that his suffering served a higher purpose: his suffering would yield our redemption. In that one man, in that one death on the cross, would come the salvation of the world. What we celebrate on Palm Sunday is the honor Christ brings to God by obediently bearing our shame to the cross. In this one man’s noble sacrifice, are all made alive again!

Assuming a face like flint becomes a virtue when it reflects well on the justice and mercy of our Lord and Master. As Jesus looked toward Jerusalem and the suffering he would endure, he knew that it would draw our attention, not to him, but to God who sent him. He brought honor to God and to us by his patience and endurance. And so today, we shout with those first crowds, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Prayer: Almighty God, on this day, your son Jesus Christ entered the holy city of Jerusalem and was proclaimed King by those who spread garments and palm branches along his way. Let those branches be for us signs of victory, and grant that we who bear them in his name may ever hail him as our Lord, and follow in the way that leads to eternal life. In his name we pray. Amen.

Face Like Flint

Palm Sunday, March 29, 2015

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Luke 19:28-40



Actor Clint Eastwood rose to fame as *The Man With No Name*. The film was one of those low-budget spaghetti Westerns churned out by Italian director Sergio Leone. In his breakout movie role, Eastwood played a mysterious drifter, a character - like so many similar roles that would follow in the years to come – which is noted for displaying little emotion, apart from his trademark teeth-gritting grimace. Leone once explained why he chose Eastwood for those roles: "At that time I needed a mask rather than an actor, and Eastwood had only two facial expressions: one with the hat and one without it."

Onscreen, Eastwood is the quintessential movie tough guy: a reserved outsider who would just as soon be left alone. It takes a lot to make him angry, but when circumstances force him to take action, he does so with single-minded ferocity. Whether firing off shots from his six-gun, lighting a dynamite fuse with his ever-present cigar, or riding off toward the dusty horizon, the classic Eastwood antihero leaves moviegoers wondering what's going on inside the mind of this unshaven, modern-day, poncho-wearing crusader.

Eastwood is known for having a "face like flint," to use Isaiah’s imagery. This stony visage is more commonly called a "poker face." A true poker face is a necessity at high-stakes gambling tables, because so much of that game is about bluffing. Poker players who can master the Eastwood squint have a distinct advantage over their opponents, whose careless facial expressions may reveal their elation at drawing a full house or their disappointment at the pair of deuces in their hand.