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by Pat Marrin

[View Author Profile](#)

[patrickjmarrin@gmail.com](mailto:patrickjmarrin@gmail.com).

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"I thought I had toiled in vain, and for nothing, uselessly, spent my strength" (Isaiah 49:4).

*Isa 49:1-6; John 13:21-33, 36-38*

Perhaps the greatest suffering in the midst of physical distress is to wonder if we have failed in our life's efforts. John the Baptist endured this darkness in his jail cell. Had he pointed to the wrong person as God's promised messiah? Other great saints like Catherine of Siena agonized over whether her intervention in the papal controversies of her time had actually contributed to the split in the church. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr asked the same question of himself as leader of the Civil Rights Movement in the exhausting days leading up to his assassination.

The Gospels, especially John, present Jesus as prescient and divinely aware of everything, but the synoptics preserve the human struggle reflected in Isaiah's Servant, who, in the midst of great suffering, asks the hardest question: "Have I toiled in vain?" The details of Jesus' final hours we so admire as he endures betrayal, denial and abandonment before being arrested and crucified, look heroic in hindsight, but what did the human Jesus experience as he faced the reality of dying virtually alone, condemned as a criminal and excommunicated as a blasphemer?

Isaiah's Servant resolves this doubt in an outpouring of praise and the promise God would vindicate him. Jesus carried this word in his heart as he approached his death. Yet, the chaos of those final hours for his disciples is recorded in the Gospels and was a profound reminder to the early church how the failure of its first leaders made mercy, not their performance, the foundation of the movement they were entrusted with. Peter, who boasted of his loyalty, failed utterly in the moment of greatest trial,

and the memory of the cock's crow was seared into his memory as he took up his role as the first pope.

Judas, the epitome of tragedy for all time, also disappears into the mystery of God's limitless mercy, and despite the infamy he carried into history, we might imagine Jesus's redemptive death securing both the good thief and the betraying Apostle as the first signs of just how deep God's love is for sinners. We now continue our journey into Holy Week with both the terrible suffering that human sin has unleashed within our world and the promise that God's love overcomes every obstacle and failure, even our doubts and our failures.

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