

“Spirit filled”
Isaiah 42:1-9
1/13/08
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Scene 1 “Here is my servant whom I uphold”

Isaiah records a conversation with God. God says, “I am Yahweh, that is, I am who I am.” This is how God identifies himself to Moses in the burning bush. And to Isaiah. “Yahweh, I am who I am. See the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare.”

Yes, the God who creates and orders the heavens and the earth, and who gives breath and life to all, tells Isaiah to speak to someone called the Servant, “You are my chosen, In whom my soul delights.”

Says God in his message to Isaiah for the Servant “My glory I give to no other than to you. Before new things spring forth, I will tell you of them.”

Time magazine records an interview between a sociologist from George Washington University and a student from that school. To conduct his interview, he took him fishing. He was the top student in the student body in the senior class, a straight "A" student, the president of his class, popular, brilliant, a big man on the campus who planned to go to medical school when he graduated. As they sat out there in the boat fishing, the professor began to question him: Why had he chosen medicine as a career. "Because medicine looks most lucrative right now." What did he want to do as a doctor? "Get into a specialty that has the shortest hours and the biggest fees." Didn't he think that a physician owed something to the community besides earning a living for himself and his family? "No, I'm just like everyone else," said the student. "I want to make the most in the shortest time possible, so I can retire and do what I really want to do." "And what is it that you want to do?" "Oh, I don't know. Travel, go fishing, take it easy."

Prayer is meant to be a two way street. But many times, because we are not listening, we cannot hear God speak to us. So we need prophets. Prophets carry God’s Word to people. God tells Isaiah to preach to someone. Someone called the Servant.

Who is this servant? Is it Isaiah himself? Is it Jesus? Is it Israel? Let us look for clues.

Scene 2 God identifies the servant’s calling

If I were to ask you what the ultimate question in life was, you might, because I am pastor, reply that the most important question a person can ask is: "Does God really exist?" But ninety-five percent of Americans would say there is a God somewhere. If you ask them the question, "Does God exist?" they would say, "Why do you ask?" They would say, "Only armchair philosophers and confused theologians have the time or

inclination to engage in such idle chatter."

Quite frankly, modern humankind doesn't care whether God exists or not. That's not their chief concern. The basic question of humankind today, as it has been through the ages, is the question of the meaning of HUMAN existence. That question has taken many shapes in the heart of man. The struggle for love, the quest for power, the sense of guilt, the encounter with death. Am I accepted by others? Does my life have any worth? If a someone dies, shall he or she live again? Is there any way out of the bondage of the law or addiction which restricts me, produces fanaticism, illusions and pride, from which I incur sickness of personality so that my hatred for others is exceeded only by my despising of myself?

The ultimate question then is not whether God exists. We already know the answer to that one. We are born with it. The ultimate question is: "Why do I exist?"

For Isaiah, there was no question. He put it simply in our lesson for the day

"God's servant will not shout or raise his voice,
He will not break the crushed reed,
He will not snuff out the dimly burning wick,
God's servant will faithfully bring forth justice to all"

Most of you have visited our nation's capitol. And have visited the monument of Abraham Lincoln. You see an enormous statute of him sitting on a chair, looking over all of Washington. His monument has become a shrine. We have lifted him up literally on a pedestal to Godlike status. But he truly had a human side.

La Salle Pickett tells a story about her encounter with Abraham Lincoln after the Union forces captured Richmond. She was the wife of George Pickett, the confederate General who led the charge at Gettysburg. It was the darkest hour of her life. Richmond, where she lived, was in flames. She had just heard that her husband had been killed. The servants had run away. She was alone in her house with her baby. There was a sharp knock on her door. She opened the door and looked up at a tall, thin, sad faced man whose clothes did not fit. He asked, "Is this George Pickett's place?" "Yes sir, but he is not here," she replied through her tears. "I know," said the man, "but I just wanted to see his place," said the stranger. "I am Abraham Lincoln." "The President," she gasped. The stranger shook his head, "No, just Abraham Lincoln, George's old friend," choking as he spoke. The stranger took the baby from his mother's arms, kissed it, looked the baby in the eyes, and said, "You tell that rascal, your father, that I love him." He handed the baby back to his mother, spun around, and walked off. Our history books do not describe the servant hood of Abraham Lincoln. We only read about God-like accounts to which we can never aspire. But Abraham Lincoln did not come to Pickett's house that day to gloat. He did not come to break a crushed reed or snuff out a dimly burning wick. He came to make peace.

But from where do people like Abraham Lincoln get their stuff?

Scene 3 God describes the fuel from which the Servant derives his energy

God says to the Servant through the prophet Isaiah,
“I have taken you by the hand.
I have put my Spirit in you.
I have formed you to be a light to the nations.
A light to open the eyes of the blind.
To bring captives out of prison, out of the dungeon where they lie in darkness.”

Robert Louis Stevenson, as a small boy, loved to watch the old lamp lighter go down the street. One night he said to his nurse, "Look, that man is putting holes in the darkness." God calls his Servant to punch holes in the dark.

We read that all of our efforts are directed toward the goals we set. Five thousand high school graduates were recently asked what they wanted most out of life. Their answers were compressed into one sentence. Here it is: "Oh, I don't know, have enough money, be happy, have a little fun." This is good. We need to take care of ourselves. Let me repeat that. We need to take care of ourselves.

But God calls the Servant to punch holes in the dark. Isaiah tells us we are limited in our thinking if we see the world as either this or that. Isaiah tells us we are called to think in terms not of either / or, but of both / and. By himself, the Servant can do nothing. But with God, he can do anything.

Scene 4 “Who is God’s servant?”

At a high school commencement service a pastor says the secret of life is to lose yourself in a cause that is bigger than yourself. Many commencement speakers have made this same point. We have an insatiable need to live in larger terms than our own fulfillment, or prosperity, or even our survival. It is hard to ignore a comment by Karl Menninger, co-founder of the Menninger Psychiatric Institute in Topeka. When asked his advice for someone fearing the onset of nervous collapse, he said he would tell the person to get out of his house, and find someone or some cause that needed him.

So who is God’s Servant?

Is the servant Isaiah? Could be, but the use of the second and third person, you and he, suggests Isaiah is not referring to himself, but to a third party.

Is it someone else the community knew so well he or she did not need to be named?
Could be, but we will never know.

Is it Jesus? Could be, but Jesus had not been born yet. And scholars feel these words are meant to comfort those living in Isaiah's present over 500 years before Jesus.

Could it be a community of faith? The Isaiah scroll was written or dictated to be read in a synagogue, to give strength and consolation. The Servant in Isaiah’s day, the Servant who is consoled, could be none other than Israel herself.

The prophet Isaiah, often quoted God, calling the people of Israel "God's servant." In chapter 41, right before the chapter we're looking at this morning, we read in verses 8 and 9: "But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, 'You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off'; do not fear, for I am with you ..."

So when we come to chapter 42, the word "servant" refers to the people of Israel, in this case, not the person who would come to save them and allow them to return to Jerusalem from their exile in Babylon, and maybe not even Jesus. Even though the servant here is referred to in the singular, it seems the whole people of Israel are whom Isaiah means by servant.

Maybe the Servant today, the Servant who God upholds, the Servant who will not break the crushed reed, who God endowed with God's Spirit. Maybe that Servant today, is us. Maybe that Servant today is you.

Conclusion

We all take our turns at being bruised or crushed reeds and dimly burning wicks, don't we? God cares for us right at these points. And we, as God's people, and surely as disciples of Jesus Christ, are called to punch holes in the darkness.

Why do we exist? Is it to make the most money in the least number of hours, so we can retire and go fishing? Is it to focus exclusively on healing ourselves? The text from Isaiah does not refute this. I repeat, it does not refute this. But I think it does suggest to us we can stop viewing our goals in life as either this or that. The text from Isaiah today suggests to us we can consider a different set of conjunctives. Instead of either / or, it suggests both / and.

By ourselves we can do nothing. With God, we can do anything. And 99% of being faithful is showing up.

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's people say ...