

Second Sunday after Epiphany/January 15, 2017

Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-11; John 1:29-42;

Rev. Joel M. Krueger

"Who Are We Now?"

Isaiah speaks to a people in turmoil. They are a people lost. Their homeland destroyed. No more "land of milk and honey." No more "manna from heaven." No more "burning bushes." No more "promised land." Judea has succumbed to the waves of warriors from the north. Babylon has conquered and left nothing standing. Jerusalem, that great city is laid waste. The Temple destroyed. The people, including the elite, the governing authorities, the religious leaders, the wealthy and powerful of their nation, they are all gone. Those that survived, were taken away to exile in Babylon.

They are a people who are no longer a people. They have lost their identity. They no longer have a land, a place that defines them. The center of their faith, the Temple, no longer exists. Where is their God? They live now in a place that is both literally and figuratively foreign to them. Surrounded by strange and unknown customs and traditions, by religions and gods that do not reflect their history, their story. How do they keep their identity in a place like this? How do they find their God? They wonder, "Who are we now?"

To this context the prophet Isaiah speaks for the voice of their God. In chapter 42 we have these words: *"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. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law."* (Is. 42:1-4)

This is the first of what are called the Servant Songs in Isaiah. There are 4 Servant Songs and our reading for today is the second. In the first, we hear **God** telling us of this "servant", this one who is God's "chosen." One who will bring forth justice without violence, destruction or war but with the words of his mouth. But here in today's reading we hear from the **servant**: *"Listen to me, O coastlands, and hearken, you peoples from afar. The Lord called me from the womb, from the body of my mother God named my name. God made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand God hid me; God made me a polished arrow, in God's quiver God hid me away. And God said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.'*

Who is this servant that Isaiah speaks of? Scholars have wrestled with this very question for centuries. Is it an historical figure? Is it a personification of the people Israel? Christians readily took on this image and attached it to Jesus. Jesus, the suffering servant. But for those people of Jerusalem and Judea who were now in exile, these words must have struck them deeply. Because it called out to them. It spoke of their need for a savior. It spoke to their desire for justice. It spoke to their need to know once again, who they were.

But who they were now, was no longer who they were before. Listen to Isaiah's words in the servant's mouth: *"But I said, 'I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.'" You see the servant is discouraged. He looks at what he has done, his whole life, the work of his hands, his accomplishments, and sees that all has failed, all is gone, nothing is left. But Isaiah says that God will not accept that. God will not even entertain such despair, such gloominess, such hopelessness.*

No, God is like the teacher who knows the possibilities of a frustrated student who can't seem to figure out the problem in front of them. God is like the coach who sees in the athlete the potential for greatness that the struggling athlete cannot see. God says to this chosen one: *"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel."* You see, it could have been enough for God to say, *"I want you to return to your land and rebuild my Temple, rebuild my people Israel, rebuild what I have lost."* That in itself would have been an amazing feat, a remarkable calling.

But that is not what God desired. That would be *"too light a thing"*. Rather, God says, *"I will give you as a **light** to the **nations**, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth!"* And here I am not sure if God is so much speaking with a stern, commanding voice, or if God is filled with a jovial spirit, not unlike that of Scrooge in Dickens' A Christmas Carol, when after he has had the visit of the 3 spirits and has decided to change his whole way of being, says to his weary employee, Bob Cratchit, *"I am not going to stand for this sort of thing any longer. And therefore, and therefore, I am about to raise your salary! A merry Christmas, Bob!"* It is as if God is granting a promotion, a higher calling, to the servant.

And then Isaiah tacks on this last part, where God says: *"Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel, and his (that is Israel's) Holy One, to one deeply despised, (and listen to this description of God's chosen one) deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the servant of rulers: (and that is who the people saw themselves as). God says: "Kings shall see and arise; princes, and they shall prostrate themselves; because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen **you!**"*

Isaiah spoke of a God who knew the depth of the people's pain, the loss of their sense of self, and like the God of the psalmist, God heard their cry and drew them up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, set them upon a rock and put into their mouths a new song, a song of praise to their God.

We may experience times in life when we wonder, "Who are we now?" Many of us have suffered loss, many of us are in places of transition or change, many are fearful of the future for our nation and our world. Our faith community itself, is at a point where we know something new has got to be born, something different is coming, that God has a **new song** for us to start singing! We may choose to live in fear and hopelessness and uncertainty about what lies ahead. Or we can believe in the assurance that whatever it is that is coming, we can approach it with courage, and hope and joy. For God is already there, calling us forward, beckoning us, to more than we have ever been before.

I don't know whether the Servant spoken of by Isaiah, was a historical individual or if it was a personification of the whole people Israel, or if it is as Kate suggested last week, every person who hears the word of God and takes it to heart. I do know that his words inspired and strengthened a people, and that Jesus himself saw his own life in those prophetic words. The Church, as it evolved over time, would also take on these words, the image of the Suffering Servant, and seek, at times, to live into them as well.

But one thing I do know, is that the very first thing the disciples did, when they were called, was to reach out to others, as Andrew did to his brother Simon, and bring them in. We are called to do the same. God calls us to reach out. To know in one another the presence and the love of our God. To be that presence of **God's light** for every person we meet and to answer the call of our God, moving forward, together, becoming something that may be very different than what we have been, but knowing it is who we are meant to be, seeking to be **God's servants** in the world. Amen.