

A COVENANT OF SERVICE

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Isaiah 42:1-9

Some years ago, a man in the church I served asked if I would go to lunch with him to talk about his career. I, of course, said yes. This man, who was about my age, and his wife, had moved to the area about a year earlier and had become active in the church—the wife more than the husband. Their story, as I understood it, is that the man had had a successful career in the corporate world, but he decided to make a change. He wanted to be an actor. So, for reasons that weren't entirely clear, they moved to Nashville, from a larger city. The wife was in health care—the corporate side—and she easily landed a good job in Nashville. The husband started taking acting courses. He may have been in a music video and a locally produced commercial and a few minutes on stage but that is about all I can recall.

At lunch that day, he told me that he wanted to start a mission. Great, I responded. What kind of mission? He told me that he wanted to open an acting school—as a mission. He wanted to help people. He talked about evening classes for adults and after-school classes for children. I asked why he needed a mission to do this. I told him that he should open his acting school, but it didn't need to be a mission. It could just be a business—but a business intentionally operated with care, with compassion, with integrity. He would run it with the attitude of a servant. He could help those who needed help, he could help children and adults, give them the benefits of acting.

The man didn't like what I said. He was determined to start this non-profit organization, with a board of directors. He wanted the church to get involved. He thought that everyone should support him.

I would like to say that I was wrong and that the acting school was a huge success. It wasn't. A non-profit was formed and a board gathered, but it never seemed to go anywhere. We all came to realize that this guy didn't really want to serve as much as he wanted to be served. He wanted this board to tell him how wonderful he was.

I was reminded of this story this week as I have been pondering the words of Isaiah about being a servant of God.

This is the first of four passages from Isaiah that are known as the Servant Songs. These passages—poems or songs—describe to us God's faithful servant.

As you will recall from our journey through the Gospel of Luke, several times Jesus claimed that in him the scriptures were fulfilled. For example, in chapter 24, Jesus says, *everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled* (Luke 24:44).

You will also recall that Luke provides no information about what it meant that the scriptures will be fulfilled. How will this happen? What will that look like? Luke didn't have to explain. His people knew the scripture (our Old Testament), they knew the words of Isaiah about God's servant, they knew the psalms and words of the prophets. When Jesus, whom they believed to be God's Messiah, talks about the fulfillment of scripture, they understand.

One of the passages that they would have been familiar with is this one from Isaiah. It is one of the four Servant Songs and provides one description of what God's servant is like.

In our reading today, God introduces and endorses the servant. God calls the servant *my chosen*. In the servant God's *soul delights*. God's spirit is on the servant and the servant will *bring... justice to the nations*.

This servant works quietly. *He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street*. Too many people think that to serve God, they must make a lot of noise, generate attention, get the accolades. That is just distraction. I think about Matthew's gospel when Jesus says:

*Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them...
Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites;
for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so
that they may be seen by others...
whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door... (Matthew 6)*

God's servant works quietly.

God's servant protects the weak and the broken. Isaiah writes, *A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench*. In other words, those who don't shine as brightly as others are not extinguished; those who are damaged are not discarded. And once again, Isaiah reminds us, the servant *brings forth justice*.

Finally, Isaiah tells us, the servant is strong. The servant perseveres and does not give up until justice prevails.

This is God's servant. The servant is chosen by God. The servant works quietly and tirelessly for justice.

Out in eastern Oklahoma, there used to be a billboard (it may still be there). Driving on the highway across flat Oklahoma you could see this billboard from far away. It huge letters it read, "JESUS SAVES." Alright, you can expect to see that in Oklahoma. As you get closer you see a second line that reads, "HE SETS THE CAPTIVES FREE." Amen to that. Then as you get right up to the billboard you see a third line. It reads, "Joe Bob's Bail Bonds" with Joe Bob's phone number. I don't think that Joe Bob is being the best servant.

In the second half of the passage, God establishes a relationship with the servant. God, who created the world and gave life, calls and claims this servant. God has taken the servant *by the hand* and gives the servant *as a covenant to the people*. The servant is to be a *light to the nations*. The servant will *open the eyes that are blind* and free the prisoners.

On the Christian calendar, today is Baptism of the Lord Sunday. It is a reminder and a celebration that on the day that Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, God publically claimed him. As we read in Matthew's gospel, Jesus came to John to be baptized. John announces that he is not worthy of this task. Jesus tells John that it must be done this way to *fulfill all righteousness*. Jesus is baptized and as he is coming up from the water the Spirit of God descends like a dove and a voice from heaven declares, *This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased*.

Jesus is the servant proclaimed by scripture. Jesus is God's chosen one baptized to bring justice, not to a few, but to all.

So, if Jesus is the servant, does that get the rest of us off the hook? No. The passage in Isaiah is a vision not just for God's anointed but for us all. In is an imagining of the servant we all should strive to be.

We find ourselves this week at the start of a new year. I don't know if each of you make resolutions, but I ask that you take this time at the start of a new calendar, to set aside a moment in prayer and reflect on your spiritual life. What direction do you wish that your life will take this year? How do you want your relationship with God to grow? I would encourage you to think about increasing your commitment to servanthood. Look at this passage from Isaiah. How can you be the fulfillment of these words? How can you quietly bring justice to the lives of those around you. How can you protect and lift up the lives of the weak and broken?

I can't tell you how to serve. That is personal. Maybe you will feed the hungry, or shelter the homeless. Maybe you will befriend the forgotten or stand against racial injustice, gender injustice, or economic injustice. Maybe you will use your talents to assist others. Maybe you will protect the vulnerable.

I have a friend who, unfortunately, rejects all religion but who quietly gives his free time to Hospice to sit with the dying. I would argue that even he is being a servant.

To be a servant of God is to live a life of servanthood—not just on Sundays, but every day, every moment. One serves not out of charity but out of a desire for justice. And imagine doing this with God's blessing, with God's spirit upon you.

Finally, servants of God may be individuals, but they can also be communities. A church can be a servant community—and should be. We do it here when we covenant together in service. All those people serving together—that is the scriptures fulfilled.