

DODGING THE BULLET

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Isaiah 49:1-7

The pastor in the Lutheran Church wanted to sell his horse. One of the parishioners was interested and went to the pastor's farm to see the horse.

The parishioner asked if he could ride it. The pastor answered "Yes, but this is a Christian horse and I've taught it Christian commands. There are two things you need to know."

1. If you want the horse to go faster, you say "Praise the Lord!"
2. If you want the horse to stop, say "Amen."

So, the parishioner gets on the horse and shouts, "Praise the Lord," and the horse begins to walk. He repeats "Praise the Lord," and the horse begins to trot. He loves it and wants to go faster, so again, he shouts "Praise the Lord," and the horse goes into a fierce gallop.

Then, the parishioner looks ahead and sees a cliff ahead of them, panics, and thinks, I can't remember the words for STOP. Finally, he remembers to say "Amen."

The horse stops, and the parishioner looks over the cliff and sees how they almost perished, and yells, "Praise the Lord!"

The man, sitting on the horse at the edge of the ravine, had—momentarily—as we say, dodged a bullet. He was safe. He had survived certain calamity. The humor in the joke, of course, is found in that moment of salvation when he relaxes and gives thanks to God declaring "Praise the Lord" and sending the horse over the edge.

There are many instances in our lives when we metaphorically dodge bullets. Maybe it is a near miss at an intersection. Maybe it is catching a mistake in your checkbook. Once, I was showing a friend how to shoot a rifle. It was going well until she lowered the gun to the ground but then inadvertently pulled the trigger. The gun went off. She almost shot me in the foot. I dodged a bullet.

Dodging a bullet is sometimes due to luck, but usually it because we did something—we actively "dodged" at the right time. Maybe it is something small, like stopping as someone runs a red light. If you are a student, maybe you didn't study for a test but when you get to school you discover that the teacher is out sick. No test. You dodged a bullet. Maybe you attended your high school reunion and saw your love interest from back in the day. Bullet dodged.

Bullets can be large. Maybe you survived a health scare. “The doctor discovered the tumor just in time. Dodged a bullet on that one.” Or even bigger, a nation, through diplomacy, averts going to war.

When we do manage to dodge a bullet, we usually respond with relief and gratitude. “Thank you, God,” and we move on. A bullet dodged is behind us; it is in our past. We can move forward.

However, according to today’s reading from Isaiah, as Christians, as people of faith, as servants of the Lord, we are not to sit back when we’ve dodged a bullet, but instead are called to push on serving God in ways we can’t comprehend. We are to view dodged bullets as beginnings, not endings.

Our reading today is the second of four passages in Isaiah that are known as the Servant Songs. We looked at the first one in chapter 42 last week. You will recall how the servant is one called by God to bring justice to the nations. The servant is strong and persistent and works quietly. The servant is a light to the nations and has power because of God’s spirit. The servant songs are beautiful poems which provide descriptions of the servants of God. The servant songs originated at a time of great distress for the Jews. It was the time of the Babylonian Exile in the 6th century BC. The Babylonian army had laid waste to Jerusalem and carried many of her citizens back to Babylon. With Jerusalem and the temple destroyed, the people openly questioned if God was still with them, or had they been abandoned.

But God, we know, is with them. In today’s reading, the servant speaks. The servant was called by God before birth. God gave the servant power. God made the servant’s mouth sharp like a sword, and the servant to be like a *polished arrow*. A polished arrow would be strong and would fly straight. Like a sharp sword, it is a formidable weapon. But God may not use the servant immediately. God may tuck the servant away until God is ready. Like an arrow in God’s quiver, the servant is one of many waiting to be used at a needed time. God declares, *You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.*

How great it must be to be the servant of the Lord. But the servant laments that in service to the Lord, *I have labored in vain*. The servant’s purpose is to gather the people home to Jerusalem, to save them and bring them back from across the world. The people want to go home, they want to be restored. The servant’s job is clear—bring the people home.

God changes the servant’s mission. Simply returning the exiles to their homeland is, as God puts it, *Too light a thing*. Instead, God tells the servant, *I will give you as a light to the nations*. The purpose of this redeployment is for God’s salvation to *reach the end of the earth*. Returning the exiles to their homes is good, but it is just dodging a bullet. Bringing God’s salvation to all the earth, that is the task worthy of a servant.

As I look out, I see all of you, who in some way have answered the call to servanthood. You embrace this as a key part of your faith, of being a Christian. You serve in many wonderful, compassionate, and usually quiet ways. You are generous and patient, loving and kind. You are God's emissaries on this earth.

However, as we read in Isaiah, the servant is called for more than that. Feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless is well and good, but it is just a temporary fix; it is dodging bullets. If we are satisfied with doing these things, then we are free to be God's plumbers patching leaks, clearing pipes.

But God calls his servants to more, to work for the restoration of all creation, to be a light to the nations. From beginning to end, this is the story of God—the salvation of the world. And God invites us to be part.

That is our challenge—to seek beyond our immediate concerns and into the needs of creation. What can we do to make this world God's kingdom? God offers us a divine purpose beyond our limited self-interests.

You are servants. You may not feel equipped for the job but you are. God made you. You are a sword, an arrow. You have power. God chose you before you were born. God may even have kept you hidden, planning for you to do your work later in life. When the time is right, if not already, you will be called forth, pulled from the quiver to serve.

Here, at the beginning of 2017, may we commit ourselves to being Christian servants. And to get us going, let us say together, Praise the Lord.