

The Servant of the Lord
Text: Isaiah 49:6
Preached by Bruce D. Ervin
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This week presents an interesting challenge for a preacher. Today would've been the 88th birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And on Friday, Donald Trump will be inaugurated as the 45th President of the United States. The juxtaposition of these two dates and these two very different leaders calls for some kind of comment from the pulpit. As the great theologian Karl Barth said, the preacher should carry the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. In other words, the God who engaged the world in Jesus Christ calls the Church – the *Body* of Christ – to be *similarly* engaged in the affairs of our world today.

The challenge is, what do you say? There will be sermons preached today from the left that will praise Dr. King as if he was almost the 2nd coming of Christ, and will all but suggest that Mr. Trump is a servant of the Devil. There will be sermons preached today from the right that will give only lip-service to the greatness of Dr. King, and then suggest that Mr. Trump is the servant of the Lord. The Rev. Franklin Graham – Billy's son – all but said that when he suggested that Mr. Trump won the election through an act of Divine intervention. *Neither* approach reflects biblical preaching. The Bible calls us to be engaged in the issues of the day *without* blessing a *particular* politician or activist or ideology with the mantle of the Lord.

Searching for the biblical ground upon which to stand this day – so as to not to fall into the temptations of *either* the left *or* the right – I consulted the Lectionary. This indispensable tool for the preacher provides a 3 year cycle of Bible readings which draws the preacher out of his or her own prejudices and pre-conceived notions, and guides the preacher into the Word. So, I consulted the Lectionary, I opened-up my Bible, and there I found the 49th chapter of Isaiah; a passage that defines the attributes of the Servant of the Lord. I mean, how providential is that?! This lectionary was crafted more than 30 years ago, and here we have the perfect passage for this very day! Some might point to Dr. King as God's servant, others might point to Mr. Trump as God's servant, and lo and behold we're given a scripture passage in which the Bible *tells* us what God's Servant looks like.

So today we're going to look at how the *Bible* defines servant leadership. We're going to ask 3 questions: Who is God's Servant? What are the tasks of God's Servant? And how do we apply this biblical wisdom today? We're going to do that primarily by looking at Isaiah 49, as supported by Isaiah 42 and Isaiah 53. These chapters comprise the three "Servant Songs" of Isaiah.

"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights..." So says God, speaking through the prophet, in Isaiah 42:1. Thus begins the Servant Songs: three mysterious passages of 6th century B.C. prophecy. But who is this servant whom God has called; this leader upon whom God has placed God's Spirit? Biblical scholars and other believers have been asking that question for more than 2,000 years. Some say it is the prophet himself. Others say it is the entire nation of Israel. Christians have overwhelmingly identified the Servant as

Jesus Christ. The connection seems particularly clear when we consider the 3rd servant song, in Isaiah 53:

“He was despised and rejected by others; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief... he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed” (Isaiah 53:3-5).

Sound familiar? It should. We hear those words just about every year on Good Friday. They have been appropriated to talk about Jesus, and rightly so. Jesus is, of course, the epitome of servant leadership; the One upon whom God has *especially* placed the mantle of servanthood. But Old Testament scholar Claus Westermann argues that if we identify the Servant Songs with any one particular servant of God – Jesus or anyone else – we miss the point. He suggests that the prophet intentionally left the identity of the Servant shrouded in mystery. Maybe the Servant of the Lord is not so much a particular person as it is a category, or a job description. Perhaps what we have here are the qualities and attributes and tasks of the servant-leader. In other words, there is a particular job or position called “the Servant of the Lord.” Better yet, there is a sacred office called “the Servant of the Lord;” that’s “Servant” with a capital “S.” God fills this office with a particular person at a particular point in history when the conditions warrant it. Jesus, of course, is the Servant of the Lord par excellence. But there have been others as well. I would include at least some of the Old Testament prophets, and St. Paul, and St. Hildegard von Bingen, and Mahatma Gandhi.

The key thing about the Servant of the Lord is that he or she is chosen *by God*. “*The Lord called me before I was born,*” the prophet says in Isaiah 49:1. And then, in verse 7, it is “*the Holy One of Israel... who has chosen you.*” God chooses the Servant. And God chooses whomever it *pleases* God to choose. It doesn’t matter what you and I think. God has God’s own reasons for choosing him or her. It’s kind of like, when a parent makes a decision that a little child must abide by, and the child asks why, and the parent responds, “Because I am the parent!” Period. Full stop. End of discussion. Nothing more needs to be said. God has chosen the servant, and that’s the only thing that matters.

So, the Servant of the Lord may not be a particular person, but rather an office or position that God has filled with particular servants at particular times in history. God has done this in the past, and God will do it in the future, and it is purely by God’s free choice that God fills the position: when, and with whom, God chooses.

But what are the *tasks* of the Servant? There are three: justice, gentleness and suffering. Isaiah 49:6 says, “I will give you as a light to the nations.” Isaiah 42:1 makes it a little more specific: “He will bring forth *justice* to the nations.” The Hebrew word is *mispat*, and it points to the kind of compassion and wisdom and fairness that binds people together with one another and with God. All people, *everywhere*, will be able to share in the bounty of God’s Creation. No one, *anywhere*, will be forced to live in poverty and despair. That dream lies at the heart of God’s *mispat*: as proclaimed by the prophets who said, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream;” as practiced by ancient Hebrew farmers who always left grain in the field for the poor; as ordered by the Law that said you *must* care for the widow and the orphan, and welcome the foreigner. The dream was already enshrined in Hebrew

tradition when God brought forth the job description for the Servant. A passion for *justice*, a resolve to bring forth *justice*, is above all else what the Lord requires of God's Servant. "What does the Lord require of me," asks the Prophet Micah, "but to seek *justice*, and love *kindness*, and walk *humbly* with God" (Micah 6:8).

To justice, add gentleness. The task of the Servant is to be *gentle* with all who are hurt and vulnerable. "A bruised reed he will not break," says the prophet, "and a dimly burning wick he will not quench" (42:3). The one who has already taken a major hit will not be hit again; the one who is already vulnerable will not be singled out for attack or ridicule or abandonment. One thinks of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery. Her reputation already destroyed, her conscience deeply bruised by what she has done, Jesus knows that she's suffered enough and sees to it that no one causes her any more harm. "Go, and sin no more," is all that he says. Such gentleness is a hallmark of the Servant of the Lord.

To justice and gentleness add...suffering. The Servant will endure suffering on behalf of others. When attacked, he will not cry out. And attacked he will be because – says Isaiah 49:7 – he will be "deeply despised, abhorred by the nations..." And again, from Isaiah 53, he will be "a man of suffering, and acquainted with grief." The Servant is not one who's trying to win a popularity contest, but one who is willing to bear the burdens of others, no matter how much pain and derision may come his or her way for doing so. It should not surprise us that so many of God's servants have become martyrs. St. Paul and Gandhi and – above all else, Jesus – bearing the burdens of others and being obedient, even to the point of death.

So the Servant of the Lord is a job description for one who is chosen by God; and the tasks of that servant-leader include justice, gentleness and suffering. But how do we apply this biblical wisdom today? Well, first of all, it is only in retrospect that we can say that a particular leader was the Servant of God. As scripture says, "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Mt. 7:20). It takes a while to assess those fruits; it takes a while to assess the accomplishments and failures of any leader. Among our presidents, the *only* one whom I would call the Servant of the Lord is Abraham Lincoln. He brought justice to the slave; he treated with gentleness nearly all with whom he came in contact; he was despised and he suffered and he was obedient unto death. The criticisms that were hurled at Lincoln in his life make the criticisms that were lobbed at President Obama look like a friendly badminton game. Yet Lincoln responded with good humor and gentle grace, and he stayed the course.

It is only in retrospect that we can identify God's Servant. I think we can now say – nearly 50 years after his death – that Dr. King was such a Servant. He was no saint, but he was a Servant: a gentle soul, who sought justice, and was despised, rejected and killed.

It is only in retrospect that we can identify God's servant. History, and the God of history, will pass judgment on President Obama, and Mr. Trump, and anyone else upon whom overly enthusiastic acolytes may be tempted to place the mantle of servanthood. *God* is the Judge. *God alone* is the Judge. *God* chooses the Servant, and it is only *well* after the fact that we should *dare* to make our *feeble* assessments of what, and through whom, God has or has not done.

But even today, anyone whom we might someday call the Servant of God had better be willing to speak truth to power. The Servant of God is never a “yes man;” never a pleaser; never one whose primary strategy is to curry favor and tell those in power only what they want to hear. On the contrary, the Servant of God is Frederick Douglas telling a hesitant Abraham Lincoln to free the slaves. The Servant of God is Rosa Parks telling the white policeman, “Sir, I’m just too tired to stand at the back of the bus.” The Servant of God is Dr. King telling President Johnson that he *will* push for voting rights, even when the President told him to back off. The Servant of God may well be among those today who are saying that in an age when only about 25% of eligible voters actually cast a ballot for Mr. Trump (that is to say, the voter turnout was so low that only 25% of eligible voters cast a ballot for the winning candidate), we should be making it *easier*, not harder, for people to vote.

You’re likely to be despised if you dare to speak truth to power. You’re likely to be fired if you dare to speak truth to power. You might even be killed if you dare to speak truth to power. But it’s *only* when people speak truth to power that this crazy world is moved closer to the Kingdom of God: foretold by prophets, proclaimed by Jesus, and birthed by the blood of martyrs.

With a job description like that, who would dare to even *try* to be God’s Servant? Well, it may seem impossible to us, but with God, all things are possible. What makes it possible to be God’s Servant is finally the gift of the Holy Spirit. Again, Isaiah 42: “Here is my Servant,” says the Lord, “I have put my Spirit upon him.”

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” Jesus said in his own inaugural address. “He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor and liberty to the oppressed.”

“Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom,” said St. Paul (2 Cor. 13:17).

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we can do *whatever* it is that God has called us to do.

Very few are called to be the Servant of the Lord – with a capital “S,” – but *all* Christians are called to acts of service. All Christians are called to serve the Lord according the particular gifts with which God has blessed each of us. All Christians are called to model servant-leadership, and to call upon all elected leaders to similarly follow – as best they can – the model of leadership that God has ordained. Seek justice, be gentle – especially with the most vulnerable – and be willing to suffer for the sake of God’s Kingdom. With the mantle of the Holy Spirit upon us, we can all seek to be servants. God expects nothing less of all who would follow Jesus. Amen.