

Today’s passage from Isaiah is the second of what are known as servant songs. Last week we identified the first servant as the Persian King, Cyrus, who allowed the Jews in exile to return home. The commentaries offer much discussion on identifying the servant addressed in this second servant song. I’m going to let that discussion be and focus on other aspects of the text.

What is interesting to me is how the servant seems discouraged and feels like a failure. The task she or he has been given has taken too long and been more difficult than expected. Perhaps he or she doesn’t feel they were up to the call that has been placed upon their life. Maybe others have become impatient with how they are handling the task at hand. Yet, the voice of God we hear is not a voice of consolation. God doesn’t say, “it’s all right; perhaps I gave you more than you could handle.” Rather, God says: “what I gave you was too small a task; let me give you a larger task. Instead of just restoring the nation of Israel, I want you to be a force in restoring all nations and all peoples.” Does God expect too much? Does God have so much confidence in this servant that God won’t take “no” for an answer?

How do we come to this text? Can you think of a time when you felt you had failed? When you felt you were not up to the task presented for you to do? When the last thing in the world you wanted was to be given a greater, larger task just because someone else believed in you and was sure you could do it? Is it good news to know that in spite of how you might feel in the moment, One who is greater believes in you and has confidence that you can accomplish what is at hand; that you can face the challenge before you. The servant song is not just “no I can’t” but is also the refrain “yes you can.”

We are here on the second Sunday of Epiphany. The magi have taken the good news of a baby born back into the world at large (not just Israel) but their world. Though we don’t know if the magi felt they were successful, we know that somehow their witness was transmitted through the ages, the message that God became incarnate. God was and is so interested in God’s creation that leaving us to our own devices is not an option. God calls us to act, to do, to become.

Each member of this church is called to ministry. We are called to take action, to advocate for change, to move the world closer to the kingdom. Isaiah 1 says: **“Learn to do good; seek justice; correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless; plead the widow’s cause.”** Each of us has a calling. As today we remember Martin Luther King, Jr., listen to his words: **“If it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures, like Shakespeare wrote poetry, like Beethoven composed music. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, ‘Here lived a great street-sweeper who did his job well.’”** The great theologian and man of faith, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, said this about our call as Christians: **“we must bind the wounds of those the wheel has crushed, but we must also stop the wheel.”** If you can be a wheel-stopper; be a wheel-stopper.

My experience has been that churches often want to do big things. If they have the ability to do so, they want to be given a task that is big and usually concrete so that their devotion is made visible. Of course, “BIG” requires definition. Perhaps it is only my dream, but I have a big dream. I dream that here at this church we might offer at least once a month during coffee hour, a card table or two where tutors and mentors are available and where our youth would feel welcomed to bring their homework, their problems, their science projects and have someone who could listen and help them succeed. This may not sound very big or very tangible; only when we think far into the future, when perhaps one of our children is able to get into college, because

they came to you for help with English or math, does it seem a BIG calling. This kind of call requires a vision that is imaginative and future-oriented. This kind of call doesn't require money or much administration. Christina says this could be done and perhaps be very valuable to our children. If we can't help our own, why do we think helping those out-of-sight and out-of-mind will be so much nobler? I have found that it is those little things done well, with intention, it is the good that can be done without fanfare that often has the most far reaching affects for good.

I read that Scripps College in Claremont, where Congresswoman Giffords graduated, was overwhelmed with requests for something to do, some way to respond in solidarity to their injured alumni. So the college suggested that they bring food for a local food bank. Every time we bring food for the hungry and homeless, we are responding to God's call on our lives; we are doing the good that must be done for God's kingdom to come more near to earth.

If we look carefully at our society, perhaps we will notice other ways God is calling us to be agents of change. When I look closely at society, I am bewildered at why a 22-year-old young man could be so disturbed and isolated that he had nothing to give his life to other than the notoriety of grave acts of violence. The heroes of last week's tragedy were people who did not use guns to subdue the killer. Some of the heroes used their own bodies to protect others. Some applied life saving aid till help arrived. Perhaps they began the day with one task but were given one larger, bigger, and greater.

How do we live with the news that hits us most every day that in this world bad things happen? What gives me strength are those words that the arc of history is long but bends towards justice. It took a long time for the nation of Israel to finally be reestablished. And then it was some centuries before another Holy One, Jesus, called people to a kingdom beyond anything they could imagine.

This Jesus taught us *agape* love, what Martin Luther King, Jr. called "disinterested love." It is a love that does not discriminate between worthy and unworthy people; it is not based on qualities people possess or any other criteria. It is loving others for their own sakes; it is loving others because God calls us to do so. This love will not eliminate all injustices in our world, but this love will be a light to shine from out of any darkness the world can present to us. King said, ***"Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."*** When a nine year old child is killed we join the chorus of the oppressed with cries of "how long, oh God, how long?" And we hear echoes in our memories the words of Galatians: ***"So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up."*** Perhaps what we reap will be only a vision, like King said, ***"I may not reach the promised land with you, but that's all right; I've been to the mountain top and mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."***

Will we have the courage to add ourselves to the freedom chain? Will we have the strength in the face of hatred to teach love? Will we have the wisdom to be wise as serpents and gentle as doves? History has shown us the way in the life of Jesus, and history has reminded us in the lives of people like Ghandi and King. It takes courage; it takes the conviction that there are indeed things worth living for and even dying for; it is a great call. It is a calling that the Holy One believes we are up to doing. May we prove faithful.