

January 16, 2005/Second Sunday after Epiphany
David L. Edwards

God's Servant: Beyond Failure and Success

Isaiah 49:1-6

Our reading from Isaiah is the second of four so-called "servant songs" found in the Book of Isaiah[42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12]. These poems, or perhaps literally songs, give us a glimpse of the inward life and outward mission of the servant of God. The servant is an expected messiah, or Israel itself as a people. The servant is Jesus and Jesus' community, the church. The servant is you and I. The servant is whoever lives life out of God's love and purposes.

*Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention,
you peoples far away!*

*The Lord called me before I was born,
while I was in my mother's womb God named me.*

The servant knows that her life is related to the wider world. The coastlands, or, more literally, the islands of the seas. Far away peoples, not just those of one's own church or town or race or religion or economic group. The servant's life has a universal scope, and this will be reaffirmed at the end of the poem.

As servants of God in Christ, our lives and our life as a community of faith have this wider context, this wider field. Though the Church of the Covenant has historically defined its mission field as the Lynchburg community, seeking to respond to immediate and close human need, we also must recognize our belonging to the wider church and the wider world. The way we live here affects the life of the whole world. And the life of the whole world, the wider issues of human and creational life must shape how we live locally. To focus only on ourselves and disclaim our belonging to with wider church and world would be a rejection of God's broad purposes that are at work through us.

The servant senses that he was called by God even before birth, named by God in the womb. The servant's life has the very nature of "call." It is so deep and central to the servant's life that it can only be described as having been there all the time.

Kay Hicks and I were talking this past week, and she asked what I meant by the word "call," a word we use a lot in this church. My first response was that "call" describes the very nature of life. Life has purpose and meaning at its core. It is not always evident or clear, but it is there for us to discover and participate in. Our lives are not just accidental or chaotic. And when we are paying attention to our

lives, which is one way of defining the spiritual life, we feel our lives connected to something that has purpose and meaning. We are not just here, but are here to participate in the sacredness and the redemption of life. That is call in the widest meaning.

Then there is call in the specific sense. There are the ways each of us can give ourselves to life out of our uniqueness and the gifts we have been given. When we are living out of this deep sense of call, using the gifts we have, then our lives will touch some need in the world, illuminate some darkness, and heal some wound. That is why it is so important that each of us continually work with our inward journey, the discovery and rediscovery of our gifts, the daily touching of this divine purposefulness in our lives. If we are not working with that inward dimension of spiritual awareness, then our lives feel like drifting and emptiness. We center our lives in Christ who is the way God comes to invite us back into life as called, as purposeful and sacred.

*God made my mouth like a sharp sword,
in the shadow of God's 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."*

These images of having mouths like sharp swords and being polished arrows in God's quiver amplify the nature of life as "called," as purposeful. Words or mouths like sharp swords is a common biblical image for truth and speaking the truth. It is never a literal sword for hurting or destroying life. When Jesus said that he came to bring not peace but a sword, he was not giving us justification for war and violence[Matt. 10:34]. He was talking about the sword of division, those who give their lives to following him, thus serving God's purposes, and those who put everything else first. The sword may be the truth of judgment or the truth of healing, but in all cases it is God's redemptive truth. God's living word always has as its purpose the healing of life. The servant is to hear, speak, and live this kind of truth.

In Psalm 40, the psalm for this Sunday, there are these words:
*Sacrifice and offering you do not desire,
But you have given me an open ear...
Then I said, 'Here I am...I delight to do your will, O
my God.'* [vv.6-8]

We have this capacity to listen to God at the center of our being and to respond faithfully to what we hear. Through this inner listening, the servant knows when to speak which word, when to speak judgment and when to speak compassion and healing, when to speak

confrontingly and when to speak comfortingly. The servant does not always speak one or the other. The servant has become attuned to her relationship with God; she has not adopted a role, either confronter or healer. The servant is always ready to hear and do what is heard within the context and need of the present moment and circumstances.

The image of being polished arrows brings us back to purposefulness and meaning in our lives. Each of us can gleam with the connection of our own unique lives to the deepest purposes of God for life itself. St. Francis' prayer comes to mind; we can be "instruments," or arrows, of God's peace. Being hidden in God's quiver suggests that it is God who decides how and when to use us, to pull us out and send us flying into life at some point or other. This too says that we need to be working at that inward journey in which we become increasingly sensitive to when God is pulling us out of the quiver, when God is pointing us toward some need, some opportunity to give what we have to offer.

In all of this, God is glorified in the servant. We radiate God's glory when we work with all of this business of call and being persons who know themselves as called. We don't "try to" glorify God. God's glory is something seen in us as we work with being those called to serve God, discovering and using God's gifts in response to the needs of the world right around us or the wider world. The person who is taking his life seriously, trying to live it sacredly, humbly using whatever gifts God has given, glows with the divine life, is someone in whom we see God.

*But I said, 'I have labored in vain,
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my cause is with the Lord,
and my reward with my God.'*

Now the servant expresses something very real and close to us. Feelings of failure, of having wasted our lives in futile efforts, or having worked so hard at something with little or no results. Sometimes when we are giving ourselves for what we believe God has called us to, we get to the point where we see that nothing has changed. There are no results that we can show for our efforts. We tried to be faithful to God. We thought we were hearing God's voice within us, leading us and giving us a vision, a mission. Then the circumstances were just too overwhelming, or the resources ran out, or the thing just fell apart. And we're so into measuring our lives by failure and success that we plunge into despair and self-condemnation.

Then, however, though the servant has just complained that his life and energy have been spent for nothing, he reminds himself: *Yet surely my cause is with God, my reward is with God.* Being involved with God is enough. Giving our lives into the purposes of God, as best

as we can see it, is enough. Not racking up successes or groaning over perceived failures. There is no failure for one who is living close to God and following the movements of God's spirit in one's life. The only kind of failure would be not trying to live our lives as we're made to live them, as those who have ears capable of listening to God and lives capable of responding to God. The results are not up to us.

Well, here's the servant feeling all bent up and broken and like a failure, trying to keep a stiff upper lip. And what does God say? Not "You're fired", like Donald Trump. Not "Okay, let's sit down and go back over it all and see where you went wrong and how you might have been more successful." No. God says, *It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.* Here's that coastlands and far away people bit coming back into the song. God not only doesn't fire the servant, not only doesn't allow the servant to wallow in self-doubt or self-pity, but gives the servant an even bigger job to do! It's what Jesus meant when he told the disciples to shake the dust from their sandals if people rejected their message or didn't respond [Matt. 10:14]. Don't waste time and energy pouring over the past, beating up on yourself, trying to make yourself more effective and efficient. Go to the next thing that God is saying to you. Keep listening to God and following. You may feel like the biggest failure in the history of the world, but quit wasting time feeling sorry for yourself. That's not where God is. God is already calling you forward into life, into the new thing.

A vision statement written by the Covenant Members in the months following Bev Cosby's death states the following: *The vision of the Church of the Covenant lies in offering persons the opportunity to advance toward the fullest expression of their Christian faith.* Living as God's servants. Listen to God and responding with our gifts. Knowing ourselves as persons called into life, instruments of God's loving and redeeming purposes. It's not about success and failure. It's about faithfulness and the freedom to live out the visions God puts in our hearts and minds. That is what we are to be about our whole lives long, no matter what stage of life we are in. From before our birth and right up to the mysterious threshold that is our death, God is with us, always calling, always equipping, always doing a new thing through us, always wanting to shine through us.