

The Listening Servant

Isaiah 50:4-9 *The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.*

On what we now call Palm Sunday, Jesus entered Jerusalem for the celebration of the Passover. He entered the city to cries of “hosanna,” which means literally “Lord, save!” It is a cry for deliverance. Jesus’ mode of transportation symbolizes a messiah of peace—a donkey and a colt. Matthew quotes the prophet Zechariah here and may have gotten it wrong, thus two animals instead of one. It is not important to get hung up on just how Jesus managed to ride both at once! The main thing is the symbolism. This is a peace messiah not a warrior king. He rides a donkey, not a warhorse. Jesus sends a message. He represents God’s reign of peace. He does not intend to lead any kind of political uprising. He sides with neither the nationalistic Zealots nor the bourgeois Jewish elite. His kingdom, which is not of this world, can nonetheless transform this world. But not without a price.

From the heady entrance into the city, things deteriorate fast. Jesus throws out of the temple those who are turning religion into big business. He has increasing conflicts with some of the Jewish leaders. And in the end, religion and politics conspire to kill Jesus. He has become an irritant to both. We might note especially these days that when the cross and flag, the powers of religion and politics, are joined, a crucifixion takes place—the death of what is truly of God.

Jesus is a certain kind of messiah. Over the centuries particular passages from the Hebrew scriptures, or Old Testament, have illuminated who he was and is for us as our living savior and lord, the one who calls us to follow him. The Servant Songs of Isaiah are in the forefront of scriptures that have come to shed light on the nature of Jesus’ life and the spirit of his ministry and message. We heard one of the four Servant Songs [42:1-9; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12] this morning. It is vivid portrait of the servant of God and tells us just what sort of person this prophet/servant is and what makes one a prophet/servant. The passage illuminates who Jesus is and who we are as his community.

The Servant Listens to God Each Day

The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning God wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. The tongue of those who are taught. The NRSV, for some reason that escapes me, translates this “the tongue of a teacher.” This is not an accurate translation and it is an important difference. The prophet/servant of God speaks only what he has heard. He or she is constantly listening first of all. So it is important to say that the prophet/servant has the tongue of those who are taught, a disciple’s tongue.

Jesus is first of all one who listens to God and what God is saying to him. Jesus doesn’t take his directions from the world, the world of politics or of

religion, the world of competition and power or the world of being successful. What is most real for Jesus is his relationship with God and everything flows from that. Jesus is uninterested in political movements and religious power structures. “My kingdom is not from this world,” he tells a bewildered Pilate at his trial. The kingdom Jesus knows and seeks to serve is God’s kingdom, God’s dawning realm of compassion, peace, and justice. That kingdom cannot be won or established by human power of any kind but only as God works through those who have listening hearts and then speak and live what they hear.

To follow Jesus as his disciples today means that we, too, are to be those who listen first of all and who speak and act as those who are teachable. We undertake an inward journey of prayer and inner listening precisely so that we can become those who listen first of all to God. The life of discipleship begins with silence and listening. And the journey of faithful living is sustained by our growing capacity to inwardly listen to God. This kind of listening reveals to us what God is uniquely calling each of us to be and to do with our lives.

Morning by morning God wakens—wakens my ear to listen.... There is something about the morning. There is no better time for us to pray, to give our attention to God, than in the morning. Even if for a few minutes, it is important to begin the day listening to God and not all the other clamorous voices that grab at our attention throughout the day. When we immediately jump out of bed and plunge into the day’s routines and obligations, we leave no room for what God is putting before us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes: “For Christians the beginning of the day should not be burdened and oppressed with besetting concerns for the day’s work. At the threshold of the new day stands the Lord who made it. All the darkness and distraction of the dreams of night retreat before the clear light of Jesus Christ and his wakening Word.” ([Life Together](#)) The Zen Buddhist teacher and peacemaker Thich Nhat Hanh puts it this way: “Every morning when we wake up, we have twenty-four brand-new hours to live. What a precious gift! We have the capacity to live in a way that these twenty-four hours will bring peace, joy, and happiness to ourselves and others.” ([Peace Is Every Step](#))

The morning reminds us that God always gives us a new start, a fresh start. We can begin anew at any time to live out God’s love and word. We can stop, calm ourselves, and inwardly listen at any moment to God. And coming from those times of quiet and listening, we will have a word to speak that rises authentically from our relationship with the living God, a word God wants to speak through us, through our lives as well as our mouths.

The servant/prophet is given a word to speak that sustains the weary. If we want an accurate definition of the servant/prophet it is this: one who hears and speaks God’s word that is appropriate for a particular time and situation. It requires constant listening and sensitivity to what is going on, what the need is in the world around us. If we read the prophets closely, we realize that they spoke different words for different circumstances. Sometimes the right word was one of criticism of the establishment and condemnation of those in power. Sometimes the appropriate word was one of comfort and reconciliation, putting behind the sins of the past and receiving God’s new offer of life. A servant/prophet listens to God and speaks the right word for the right moment.

The Servant Absorbs Suffering and Resistance

The rest of the servant song speaks of the servant/prophet encountering resistance and even suffering. And yet it also speaks of the clear, firm, and confident resolve of the servant/prophet to carry through what he or she is called to do or speak.

If we are trying to be faithful to what we hear God calling us to be and to do, we will no doubt run into conflicts and resistance. Temptations to take the easier path and abandon what we truly feel called to speak or do. The chilling sense that nothing we say or do will make a difference, that the situation is too bleak or hopeless. Or simply the daunting awareness that the values and priorities of God's kingdom are so drastically counter to the dominant cultural climate.

The servant/prophet simply takes these things into his life, absorbs them. He gives his back to those who would strike him and his cheeks to those who pull out the beard. Instead of fleeing suffering and possible suffering, the servant accepts it as part of the call. But this without having developed a "martyr complex," without seeking suffering as some kind of spiritual badge of honor and an excuse for anger and belligerence.

The life of faithfully listening to God and doing what we feel ourselves called to do will bring us into difficulties and challenges. The difficulties may have to do with things we come up against in ourselves that stand in the way and are in need of change. The challenges may be outward things we encounter that make us want to give up. Accepting resistance in ourselves or in our world as part of the journey of being and doing what we are called to be and do, is an important part of the life of faith. It is part of our spiritual growth.

The Servant Is Determined and Confident

As the servant encounters resistance and opposition, he does not have a spirit of haughtiness or belligerence. The servant is utterly confident in God, not in her own rightness or righteousness. This is quite different from contemporary examples of religious fanaticism, Christian or otherwise. This servant, and we must say Jesus himself, is able to find that sublime place where deep resolve combines with a spirit of complete peace and peaceableness. The servant doesn't counter-attack those who set themselves against him. The servant doesn't strike back. When Jesus is being arrested in the Garden of Gethsemani, Peter draws a sword and attacks one of the high priest's slaves, cutting off his ear. Jesus orders Peter to put his sword away. This is not the way of God. Jesus does not even defend himself or condone our attempts to defend him. The way is that of suffering love, a love that is so deep and strong, so rooted in God that it absorbs the blows, the ridicule, the resistance. The confidence of faith remains focused on the mission, which is not accomplished by force but by complete trust in God.

It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?

All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.

The servant devotes himself completely to what God has called him to do. Without defensiveness, the servant can leave all things to God, even her own well being. The servant does not have to attack evil or opposition, either in

himself or outside of himself. For the servant understands that what is not of God simply has no future, will wear out and spend itself. This, too, is entrusted to God.

As we go through Holy Week, we look to Jesus the servant/prophet. He shows us the way of faith and faithfulness. It is the way of daily, even constant prayer, listening to God, cultivating lives that draw their strength, direction, and purpose from our relationship with God. It is the way that encounters resistance and challenge, either in ourselves or around us, but learns to accept and absorb the difficulties without responding in anger, fear, or retreating from what we feel called by God to do. Ultimately, we walk the way of faithfulness without resorting to violence of any kind as we entrust our lives more and more to God and God's way.

In his Letter to the Philippians, Paul included the words of a hymn or confession that was current in the churches of his day. It expressed this servant spirit of Jesus and Paul called on the church to have the same spirit, the same mind of Christ. Christ took the form of a servant, wrote Paul. He *humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross*. It is because of this servant spirit, this servant life, that God then *also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*. (Phil. 2:5-11) The servant way is the way that, even though it leads to suffering and death, ultimately is the way of Life for us and the world. May we each, during this Holy Week, find in our own lives, in our own ways, this path of servanthood and of life. It is the way of the cross and therefore the way that leads to resurrection, to new life.