

January 16, 2011 / Second Sunday after Epiphany / David L. Edwards

Beyond Failure and Success

Isaiah 49:1-6

Our reading from Isaiah is the second of four so-called “servant songs”[42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12]. These poems give us glimpses into what we might call the inward journey, the servant's insights and struggles along the way of responding to God's call. In the text, the servant is most likely Israel as a people. We can also see this servant as Jesus or ourselves as Jesus' community. The servant is each of us as we open our lives to God and the movements of God's spirit and love and purposes.

The poem begins:

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 is aware that her life is related to the wider world, the coastlands, or literally(Hebrew), "the islands of the seas". All people, all places, not just one's own church or town, race or religion or economic group. The servant's life is universally connected. Our lives and how we live them are woven into the whole fabric of life. This will be reaffirmed at the end of the poem.

The Church of the Covenant has historically defined its mission field as the Lynchburg community, seeking to respond to immediate and close human needs. This is important for us to continue. We also belong to the wider spiritual community and world. How we live our life as a community touches the life of the whole world. And the life of the whole world, human and otherwise, touches and shapes us. To live with awareness of our wider belonging opens us more fully to God's deepest purposes working through us.

The servant has the sense of being called by God, belonging to God, even before birth. Call is so deep and central to the servant's life that it can only be described as having been there all the time. In a conversation a few years ago with Kay Hicks, she asked, with her characteristic directness, what, after all, did I mean by the word “call”? We use that word a lot in our community, so it is good and fair when someone asks us what we mean by the things we talk about. It keeps us fresh and on our toes!

I responded to Kay by saying that “call”, to me, is 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 accidental or chaotic. And when we are paying attention to our lives, which is how I define the spiritual life, we see with growing clarity how our lives are interconnected with everything around us. We are not just here, but are here in ways that

participate in and contribute to life. That is call in its widest meaning.

Call in the specific sense is the way each of us lives out of our uniqueness and the gifts we have been given. When we are living out of this sense of call, using the gifts we have, then our lives will touch some need in the world, illuminate some darkness, heal some wound, enhance some beauty or joy. That is why it is so important that we work with our inward journey, the discovery and rediscovery of our gifts, the daily touching of this purposefulness in our lives. If we are not working with that inward dimension of spiritual awareness, then our lives can feel like drifting and emptiness. Our spiritual practice is to help us awaken to our true lives as those God calls into life as purposeful and sacred.

Now the servant says:

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 amplify the nature of life as "called," as purposeful. Words or mouths like sharp swords is a common biblical image for speaking the truth. It is **never** a literal sword for hurting or destroying life. Neither does it mean using words to hurt or attack, to diminish others or put them down--verbal violence. The sword may be a truth that is hard to hear or a word 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 hears, speaks, and lives this word. It is not just about talking, but about how we live in relation to others.

First of all, the servant LISTENS. 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 also knows when to speak and when to be silent. The servant does not always speak only one word. The servant is always ready to listen and then do what is heard within the context and need of the present moment and circumstances. That is what makes the servant like an arrow in God's quiver.

The image of being polished arrows brings us back to the purposefulness of our lives. Each of us can shine, as it were, with the connection of our own unique lives to the deepest purposes of God for life. 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 always 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, and some word to speak or to live. I think it is also important to know when we are being put back into the quiver, to simply BE there, at rest.

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 and often struggle with call and discovering and using God's gifts in response to the needs of the world right around us or the wider world. When we are trying to live with awareness, knowing our lives as interconnected with all of life, humbly and joyfully using whatever gifts God has given us, we glow, as it were, with divine life.

The servant now expresses a sense of futility:

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.'

I have been surprised recently by some bouts of depression as I look back over the decades, wondering whether anything I did mattered much at all, what effect I have had for good. I think we all do this at some point in our lives. The servant is expressing something very real and close. Feelings of failure, of having wasted our lives in futile efforts. Having worked hard and long at something with little or no results. We gave ourselves to what we believed God had called us to, but the thing did not work out or fell apart or had only limited effect.

I am beginning to understand that these self-judgments and self-assessments are wrapped up in our egos. We have been taught to measure ourselves by success or achievement or whatever, and to be scared to death of failure. We fall for the success and failure thing so much that it is no wonder we easily plunge into despair and self-condemnation as we assess the value or effect of our lives. When we find ourselves engaging in these kinds of self-judgments, it is important to see it as an opportunity to look deeper, through the ego, to the Self created by God, the larger Self or Person. This is our created, truest nature that finds its value and joy in simply being in relationship with God, with simply being who and doing what God created us to be and do, to the best of our ability, leaving the results to God.

The servant 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 them, 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 capable of listening and responding to God, of knowing our lives in relation to God.

This is a very important spiritual insight, for our spiritual and mental health, as well as the true effectiveness of our lives. Who among us has not felt that we accomplished very little with this or that mission or project or our lives as a whole? Or even if we feel we had some successes, there is this hidden side of that, too, when our achievements suddenly seem to run through our fingers like sand. Our egos got involved, didn't they? My take on this verse is this: we can let go of success and failure, both of them. We can drop the constant measuring of our lives. I am not talking about a healthy and useful self-examining with a desire to do things the best we can. I am saying that God takes whatever we have done or not done and weaves it into the big picture. That is not up to us. Our inward journey work is to drop the attachments to success and failure, and the past, and to awaken to the now, where God is with us, loving us as we are, opening up a new path, a different work perhaps, or a fresh engagement with our ongoing ministry or mission or commitment.

Well, here's the servant feeling all busted up and broken and like a failure. So what does God say?

*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 does not fire the servant or berate the servant for doing poorly. God does not allow the servant to wallow in self-doubt or self-pity. God does not sit the servant down and say, "Okay, let's look at where you went wrong." What does God do? God gives the servant an even bigger job to do! You are going to be a light to the nations, all the peoples. My salvation, my healing power in you will touch the ends of the earth! It is like when Jesus told the disciples to shake the dust from their sandals if people rejected their message or did not respond[Matt. 10:14]. Don't waste time and energy pouring over the past, beating up on yourself. Don't fall into the kind of ego-centeredness that thinks everything that goes wrong or does not succeed must be your fault. Open to the next thing that God is saying to you. Keep listening and following. You may feel like the biggest failure in the history of the world, but quit wasting time feeling sorry for yourself or beating yourself up. That's not where God is. God is already calling you forward into life, into the new thing. And the whole thing has the sense of our being GIVEN by God to the world, not what we achieve or accomplish by our own power or merit or whatever. It is not about our saving the

world or changing the world. It is about God renewing and healing the life of the world through us as we discern and live out as faithfully as we can the callings and gifts God gives us.

A vision statement written about eight years ago by the Covenant Members, in the months before I was called here, says: *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. Listening to God and responding with our gifts. Knowing ourselves as persons called into life, instruments of God's loving and redeeming purposes. Not getting caught in success and failure. Staying in touch with faithfulness and the freedom to live out the callings and gifts God gives us. 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 empowering, always doing a new thing in us and through us, and in this way, always shining in our lives.