

Man with a Mission

In the name of him in whom the Father is well pleased, dear friends in Christ: Today's Old Testament reading is the first of what are known as the prophet Isaiah's "Servant Songs". There are four of them all together. You're probably most familiar with the last. That's the one we use on Good Friday that contains such lines as "He was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed." It very clearly and graphically prophesies of Jesus and his atonement for our sins upon the cross.

Today's Servant Song, the first one, is a bit broader. It reads more like a commissioning statement, which, in fact, it is. In it the Lord points out to the world his particular servant, the one he's chosen, authorized, and empowered to perform a special mission for him – namely, to bring his verdict to the nations, to be their light, to open their blind eyes, and to set them free from their bondage. Furthermore, he lays out certain parameters within which this servant is to accomplish the assigned task, like not crying aloud in the street or snuffing out a weakly burning wick. I'll elaborate on those a bit later; but for the present we can without exercising too much imagination see how the words of this Servant Song also apply to Jesus.

Interestingly enough, however, that's not whom the prophet is talking about – not initially, anyway. No, in the context in which the first Servant Song appears in Isaiah's prophecy, he's actually speaking of the nation of Israel. He speaks of the whole group of people as if they were just one person: God's chosen agent. And so they were. You may remember that the Lord chose Jacob, who was the grandson of Abraham, and whom he renamed Israel, to be the father of a race that he set aside and called to be his own. To them and to no other nation was given the Law at Mt. Sinai. It told them how they were to live as God's chosen people and how they were to worship him. To them was given the Promised Land. To them was given the Tabernacle and later the Temple, where God himself lived with his people on earth and where through sacrifices he mercifully forgave their sins. To them were given the prophets and the unfolding revelation of God's plan of salvation over time. And most importantly, to them was given the lineage that would lead to the Christ, the Savior of the whole world. In a spiritual sense, Israel had all the advantages.

Meanwhile the nations around them languished in spiritual darkness. They worshipped the idols of false gods – false gods who could not see or hear them because they were fictional beings, but whose favor the people thought they could nevertheless secure by making sacrifices, offering prayers and praises, and by performing acts of service. It's really a horrible way to live because every time something goes wrong (as things inevitably do), you're left wondering which one of the gods you made angry and have to figure out what to do to get back into that god's favor again. To be sure, there were no shortage of pagan priests and prophets to answer those questions and tell you what to do; but again, everything you heard was going to be a lie, something somebody made up. So you'd do this, you'd do that, offer these sacrifices and chant those prayers at the altars of the various gods and still get absolutely nowhere. The spiritual lives of the pagans were like a rat running on the inside of one of those wheels. They'd expend all kinds of effort and expense making the wheel go round and round, without getting anywhere. And at the end of the day, they'd still be in locked in the cage of Satan's deception.

This, then, is the context of the first Servant Song. In the passage leading up to it there is the Lord's severe critique of the pagan gods and their false religions. He calls the people who

adhere to the false gods blind and deaf – just like their gods. He says everything they believe is a delusion, lies peddled by deceitful counselors who make great promises, but who provide nothing – nothing but false hope, and in the end death and eternal destruction.

But the Lord looks upon such people with compassion. He means to free them from their spiritual bondage. And so it's to them that he says, "Behold, my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him." He means look at my chosen nation Israel. Look what I've done for them. See how I live among them, how I uphold them, how I love them, protect them, and provide for them. They don't have any worries. The God who created heaven and earth is with them. And they don't run around trying to guess what I want. They have my Word. They have my truth. And they have my gracious favor – without having to buy it from me. Come into the light. Let them lead you into the light. And you too will be set free.

What follows are instructions for Israel to perform this task. He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice. That is, he's going to yell at you, shame you, or try to cram things down your throat. That isn't the way I do things. Likewise, a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; which is to say I know that you're wounded, weak, lost, and afraid. My servant Israel isn't going to hurt you. He's going to help you. He's going to heal you. He's going to share with you what you really need and hope for: my instruction, my teaching, my truth, my forgiveness, my salvation – the things that will set you free and bring you to the fullness of life.

And then the Lord turns to Israel and says, "I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the peoples, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon." This is their commissioning to be the Lord's change agent in the world, to serve the Lord by letting the light of his truth and love shine in the darkness, thus drawing all people to him like moths to flame.

And I'd like to say that they were highly successful in carrying out this mission; but that would be a lie. The truth is that they failed miserably. Why? What went wrong? Several things: to some extent there was pride and selfishness, the sense that God chose us as his own because we're better than everyone else. Those pagans out there don't deserve to enjoy the special relationship we have with the Lord. You see, they didn't understand that it was only by God's grace and mercy that they were chosen to be the Lord's servant.

That was one thing; but the far bigger problem was that instead of filling themselves with the light of God's truth and shining out it into the world, they let into their hearts the darkness of the world. They went after the false gods of the surrounding nations. They worshipped the dumb idols. They did all that stupid, meaningless, empty stuff the pagans were doing. They exchanged the truth of God for lies and became just as blind, deaf, and imprisoned as the pagans they were sent to help – and so they fell under the same condemnation.

And that brings us to what we celebrate today: the Baptism of Jesus. It's the day the Father made Jesus the man with the mission; when he said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. *You* are the servant upon whom I put my Spirit. *You* are going to do for me what Israel failed to do." And so he did: with his righteous life, with his ministry and teaching, with his death for sin and resurrection he caused the light and love of God to shine forth in the darkness. And through the Apostles he caused the light of his saving Gospel to shine in all the world – in all the world, but chiefly in the lands and among the races of the pagans. To a large extent, Israel still rejected the truth and turned from it. No, it was primarily

among those who had been long lost in the blindness and empty despair of idolatry that the Church grew to become what it is today: God's kingdom on earth consisting of his chosen and dearly loved children from every language and nationality.

And that would include us, of course, who were made God's children in Holy Baptism. That's when the light of the Lord first shined on you; when you were delivered from sin, death, and everlasting destruction by your union with Jesus and his passion, death, and resurrection. That's when your sins were first washed away. That's when God placed his Spirit upon you and said, "*You* are my beloved child, with *you* I am well pleased." Ooh, and I'll bet you know where I'm going now: that's when the Lord assigned *you* a part in the task he first gave to his servant Israel. That's when *you* became a man or a woman with a mission – a mission to shine the light, the love, and the truth of Christ into the darkness of the world around you; to help lead others into the kingdom of God.

So, let me ask: how are *you* doing with respect to this mission? Quick poll here: raise your hand if your answer is "I'm doing great. No problem. I've got this mission covered." Anyone? I didn't think so. Okay, then, let's ask why. Could it be that you're proud and selfish, imagining that God chose you and made you his child because you somehow deserved it, that you really are better than some people, and that there are others out there who are less deserving, who wouldn't fit in, who are beyond redemption, or, truth be told, you hate enough to secretly hope that they don't escape eternal damnation? Hmm? If you still have a sinful nature, and you do, then the answer to that question is yes. And for such things you need to repent.

But while that's no doubt a part of the problem, like it was for Old Testament Israel I'm guessing that the greater impediment to you fulfilling your mission for the Lord is idolatry: *you* filling your heart with the darkness of the world instead of the light and truth of Christ; *you* looking exactly like, sounding exactly like, and living exactly like the pagans around you – or at least close enough that they can't notice a difference. And you may say, "Wait a minute, Pastor, how can you accuse me of idolatry? I'm not worshipping idols like those Israelites did." No, and neither are your pagan neighbors. But don't tell me that they haven't got their gods.

A god is not so much an object of worship as it is an object of trust. It's anything other than the Lord that you look to for security, for happiness, or for fulfillment. It's whatever you fear or fear living without. We fill our hearts with all kinds of idols: wealth, property, work, people we love and care for, entertainment, sports, our physical health and well being: created things to which we look to give us peace and joy instead of the Creator who makes and sustains all things. These are the things the pagans seek after because to them, that's all there is. But as his children we are called to seek first the Lord and his righteousness – the righteousness he gives us freely through faith and trust in Christ – and then to trust him to take care of all the rest of our needs. But we don't do this.

And so for this too – this worldly idolatry we are so thoroughly engrossed in – we also need to repent. Therefore let's cast aside the idols and seek the Lord's forgiveness. Let's pray daily that he will renew in us his Holy Spirit. Let's let him fill us with the light of his love and truth through hearing his Word and receiving Christ's body and blood. For these are what will empower and equip us to live as his children and fulfill the mission he's given us: to be a light to the nations, to open eyes that are blind, and to set free those who sit imprisoned in darkness through the Gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!