



“A Different Kind of Servant”

Text: Isaiah 42:1-9

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

Sunday, December 16, 2018

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

In the acclaimed series, *Downton Abbey*, we are reminded not only of the luxurious life of the well-heeled and nobly-bred members of the aristocracy, but of the lives of those who served them. Both noble and servant have their unique problems and challenges, joys and heartbreaks, but when we watch the servants in action – sometimes performing apparently meaningless tasks and sometimes performing enormously important work – we begin to see that the everyday work of those who serve is incredibly important.

It is Carson, the head butler, who gives us some direction this morning. Among the many wonderful things placed on Carson’s lips by the writers, this one statement stands out. Carson says, “We must always travel in hope.”

That was a message that could have been shared by Isaiah. In the second portion of Isaiah, which begins at chapter 40, the hope of restoration is being shared with people who are still dealing with the trauma of the Babylonian invasion and the exile of the leaders and artisans of the people. Will they ever find restoration? Will they ever know reconciliation with their exiled loved ones? Will anything be the same as it was before? You can imagine their questions.

To these disheartened and discouraged, the word of the Lord comes from the prophet. The prophet speaks of a “servant” and there has always been great debate as to who this servant is. Some say the servant is the nation – that God’s people are the servant of God. Others think that prophet is an individual - a chosen one - an appointed one. And still others think it could be both.

No matter, this servant is described in ways that might seem counter to what was needed in that desperate situation. In such a time and in such a situation, we might expect God to send a powerful warrior to set things right. What's needed is someone who will upset the political system, challenge the way things are, and get to work knocking heads together. What we need is a show of military force to take down the invader and the oppressor. What we need is a leader like David – oh, those good old days when David was king – we need a leader like that to vanquish and crush our enemies. In times of despair and despondency, we need a tough guy – a strong guy – a no-nonsense guy, who will use whatever force is necessary to accomplish the purpose of making Israel great again.

But the word of the Lord from Isaiah is, “not so fast.” God’s vision for what is need differs wildly from the view held by the people. Scholar Michael Chan summarizes the servant of God’s promise in this way:

- is upheld and chosen by God (verse 1)
- is one in whom God delights (verse 1)
- is one on whom God’s Spirit resides (verse 1)
- is one who brings forth justice to the nations (verse 1)
- is one whose voice is not raised in the streets (verse 2)
- is one who does not break a bruised reed or quench a burning wick (verse 3)
- is one who faithfully brings forth justice (verse 3)
- is one who will work tirelessly until justice is established in the earth (verse 4)
- is one who has teaching that the coastlands wait upon (verse 4)
- is one who has the support of God (verse 6)
- is one who is given as a “covenant to the people” (verse 6)
- is one who is a “light to the nations” (verse 6)
- is one who will “open the eyes that are blind”(verse 7)
- is one who will “bring out the prisoners from the dungeon ... those who sit in darkness” (verse 7)
- is one who is part of the “new things” God is up to (verse 9)

Nothing is said of a servant wielding a sword. Nothing is said of a servant reeking destruction on those who oppress. Nothing is said of a servant setting people against people. Nothing is said of a servant hardening hearts to those in need.

And nothing is said of where or when the servant will appear. That is left to our imagination and our observations. We are left to wait and to watch for this “new thing” that God is doing. It is up to us to stay awake, to be alert, to mindfully be aware of God’s activity all around us.

What we can say is this:

wherever God’s will is being done,
wherever God’s message of hope is being rightly proclaimed,
wherever the cause of true justice is being established,

wherever the light fractures the darkness,
wherever the blind eyes are opened,
wherever those who are held in any form of captivity are set free,
there is where the servant of God is at work.

The servant of God is a servant of hope. The servant of God is an agent of divine change. The servant of God comes to right wrongs, bring healing to the broken, and compassion and kindness to those beaten and battered down. The servant of God travels in hope and is a different kind of servant.

Now, if you go back to the original question about who this servant is, you may see Jesus Christ as that servant of God. And you would be right. As Christian people, we see the words of Isaiah come alive in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He was one sent to bring forth justice, given to us as a covenant, to be a light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, and to set the imprisoned free. For us, as disciples of Jesus Christ, there is no room for doubt or debate. We see Jesus Christ in these ancient words.

But, we might look a little deeper and discover that we can also find ourselves in these ancient words. It is not enough to sit back and wait for God to do all that needs to be done. If that is your view of Advent waiting, it needs to be challenged and changed. God's people are called to be a servant people. We Presbyterians believe that so much that we included it in our Book of Order. We have always said, in one way or another, that we have been chosen and called by God for service as well as for salvation. We are the servants of God - whom God upholds, God's chosen in whom God delights.

We are called to bear God's way to the world. We are called to live God's way as an example to others of how God created us to live. We are challenged by God to be a different kind of servant - servants who put away violence and intimidation, judgmental attitudes and preconceived prejudices. We are called to be servants who bring people together, build bridges of reconciliation, and establish justice and fairness for all people. We are called to be humble servants who seek God's glory above all others, including our own.

And when the world in which we live is filled with chaos and confusion, we are called to be "a light to the nations." As God's servants, we are called to do what we can to bring the fullness of God's way to our weary world. The miracle is that God can use the imperfect to bring about the perfect. It was songwriter and theologian Leonard Cohen who said so perfectly in his song, "Anthem": "Forget your perfect offering, there is a crack in everything, but that is where the light gets in." Our efforts may be imperfect, our efforts less than 100%, our success only partial, but God calls us to serve - bringing light to the nation, bringing justice to those suffering injustice, opening the eyes of the blind, leading the prisoners out of darkness, and being a part of the "new thing" that God is doing.

A different kind of servant. A servant who offers a different kind of service. Not by might, not by intimidation, not by force is God's mission accomplished. By love, by justice, by compassion is God's will done.

This is the very heart of the hope that is ours in Jesus Christ. This is the very nature of the hope that is ours because God calls us out of darkness into God's own marvelous light. This is the hope that does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts.

Take Carson's word as truth: "We must always travel in hope."
That means for now and evermore. Amen.



First
Presbyterian
Church

609 South East Second Street
Evansville, IN 47713
(812) 423-6297
www.firstpresevansville.com

First Presbyterian Church
is a partner congregation with
the Covenant Network
of Presbyterians.

