

The Servant's Challenge: To Bring Justice
Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 12:9-21

During Advent we looked at the passages from the prophet Isaiah that spoke of the promises of a Messiah who was to come. In what scholars call Second Isaiah there are four passages that are known as the Servant songs. A great deal has been written about who the Servant is in these passages with most believing that when Isaiah was first written the Servant referred to the people of Israel. It is clear that the writers of the New Testament believed the Servant spoken of in Isaiah was Jesus Christ for there are several places where these passages are quoted in reference to Jesus. And yet as I began to read and study these passages for this series of sermons I was struck by Paul Hanson's words in his commentary on Isaiah 40-66. He said "Rather than being a biographical description of one person in one place and time, the Servant thus is the description of the human being whom all who love God are challenged to become." (Hanson, Interpretation: Isaiah 40-66, John Knox Press, 1995, p. 44) Therefore, if he is right within these words found in Isaiah we find a description of what it means to live as a child of God and a disciple of Jesus Christ. They were the same challenges that the people of Israel faced, that the disciples of Jesus faced, that Paul and the early Christians faced and they are the challenges that we face as the people of God seeking to be his servants today. Therefore, as we look together at these four Servant songs in Isaiah we will be looking back at Isaiah's message to the people of Israel and forward to the challenge that lies before us as we seek to be servants of God in our world today. We will be looking for what we can learn from this prophet whose words still ring true today.

The first challenge in today's passage is heard three times in the first four verses - "*He will bring forth justice to the nations,*" "*he will faithfully bring forth justice,*" and "*he will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth.*" The word translated justice is the Hebrew

word “*mishpat*” which is found more than 200 times in the Old Testament. It means giving people what they are due whether punishment or protection or care. In God’s view it means treating all people equally. The just person lives a life of honesty, equity and generosity in every aspect of their life. It is a central concept of the Old Testament. Often in the Old Testament *mishpat* or justice is used when talking about the care of widows, orphans, immigrants and the poor. These are people that in their society had no social power. Today we would add the refugee, the migrant worker, the homeless, single parents, and the elderly to this list. To bring forth justice means that servants of God work to be sure these people especially are treated fairly because God is on the side of the oppressed. Justice - *mishpat* - is the order of compassionate justice that God has created and upon which all of creation depends.

We hear a great deal in our society today about justice and seeking justice and if we are honest there are a great deal of people who have different opinions about what justice looks like and why we should provide justice. As well as how justice should be enacted. But what we need to hear today as servants of God is God’s definition of how justice is brought forth and we might be surprised by what God describes as biblical justice.

Isaiah’s words that open this passage “*Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, to whom my soul delights*” remind us of the powerful words Jesus heard when he was baptized by John in the Jordan River. “*This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*” (Matthew 3:17)

Empowered by God’s Spirit God described how his servant would bring forth justice

*“He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.”*

The servant's challenge is to establish justice with a loving, humble, gentle heart. It involves seeing the needs around us and responding not by crying out about a need for justice but with actions that respond to the needs. That is where the example of Jesus is so powerful for us. In our passage from Matthew today Jesus was confronted by the Pharisees about what was appropriate to do on the Sabbath.

Jesus entered the Synagogue. There was a man present who had a withered hand - an impediment but not a life-threatening illness. The Pharisees pointed at the man and asked if it was lawful to cure on the Sabbath. Jesus said what if a man who had only one sheep saw his sheep fall into a pit. Wouldn't you expect him to reach in and get him out? And then these powerful words - *"How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep."* So yes, if there is a need then the right choice is to respond so it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath and any other day. And Jesus healed the man.

But note what Jesus did after he healed the man. Jesus did not make a big deal about his healing the man - he did not say look at what I did. He did not call attention to his actions. As a matter of fact he told the crowds not to talk about what they had seen. His actions caused Matthew to remember the words of the prophet Isaiah and to identify Jesus as God's servant. For Jesus had not gone into the streets proclaiming his actions but he had simply brought justice to the situation by healing the man.

The images the prophet Isaiah used of *a bruised reed* and *a dimly burning wick* were no doubt powerful images for the people of Israel who first heard them. For the people of Israel that Isaiah spoke to were in exile in Babylon. They were bruised and beaten. The word translated bruised is actually the stronger Hebrew word meaning "to crush." As a people they identified with the bruised almost crushed reed but the prophet's words were that the servant would not break the bruised reed.

His purpose was not to inflict more pain on an already crushed people. He would not quench out the burning wick.

Think a minute about what we do when we are trying to light a candle and the wick looks like it is about to blow out. We cup our hand around the wick to protect it from the elements believing that the flame can grow stronger with some care given to it. And it usually does. Friends, the response of the servant of God is offer help not to make matters worse by crushing the spirit of the one in need. There is a powerful word of hope here for the promise is that the servant will bring justice by offering compassion and mercy to the needy. For that is how we faithfully bring forth justice. Not with words touting our compassion but with actions. Because our actions bring hope to others and open the door for us to share the gospel.

Doug Nichols was a missionary in India in 1967 when he had to spend several months in a sanitarium with tuberculosis. Being a missionary, he was eager to share the Gospel with the doctors and nurses and patients, but everyone saw him as a rich American and simply would have none of his tracts and well-meaning witness. One night Mr. Nichols was awakened by his own coughing around 2 a.m. As he was trying to recover from a coughing spell, he noticed an elderly, very sick patient across the aisle trying to get out of bed. He would sit up on the edge of his bed, try to stand, but finally fall back into bed. He remembers hearing him finally start to cry.

The next morning Mr. Nichols found out that the man was simply trying to go to the bathroom, and ended up going in his bed, producing an awful smell throughout the ward. The nurses were upset, and roughly handled him as they cleaned up the mess. The poor man, embarrassed to death, simply curled up and wept.

The next night, Mr. Nichols again was awakened by another coughing spell and noticed the same man going through the same agony. Finally, Mr. Nichols struggled out of bed himself, and

carried the dumbfounded man to the toilet, a small room with a simple hole in the floor. When he got back to the man's bed he said something to him that he assumed was "Thank you."

What happened next is a witness to what happens when we respond to needs with justice. From the time the sun came up that next day people were at his bed, asking for his leaflets and reaching out for the Gospel of Christ. All because he took a man to the bathroom. All because he responded to a need and faithfully sought to right a wrong. He had shown with his actions that he cared. (<https://sermons.com/sermon/the-sacred-other/11462>)

Friends, tomorrow is MLK day. A day when we honor the life of an African American man who sought to bring forth justice in our nation. One of the most important things to remember about Martin Luther King Jr. is that at the root of his actions was a commitment to bring forth biblical justice in our nation. You may or may not know that he had a PHD in Systematic Theology. He was a pastor first and a theologian. His actions were rooted in his biblical beliefs that all persons should be treated equally. If we are honest we acknowledge that we have a long way to go as a nation to make this true. Some days it feels like we are going backwards instead of forward in our efforts for justice for all. And yet that is why as servants of God we need to be challenged to bring forth justice in our churches and our communities. We are called to set things right so that all people are treated fairly. We are challenged to have the eyes to see need, to respond with compassion, and to work to align our own lives with God's desire for justice for all in the community and the world.

Isaiah reminds us that we are called by God, taken by God's hand, kept in God's providence and given the tools to respond. Hear how Eugene Petersen translates verses 6-7 in the Message:

"I am God. I have called you to live right and well.

I have taken responsibility for you, kept you safe.

I have set you among my people to bind them to me,

*and provided you as a lighthouse to the nations,
to make a start at bringing people into the open, into light;
opening blind eyes,
releasing prisoners from dungeons,
emptying the dark prisons.”*

God wants justice for all - that is how God envisioned the world - but God desires - God needs - our help for our world is broken. Our challenge as God's servants - as those who are seeking to live as Jesus taught us to live - is to be those who open blind eyes - and not just the physically blind but also those who do not understand the vision of a world where justice for all exists.

We are called to share God's vision for our world - a world where we care for all our neighbors, where kindness and compassion is the priority of our days and where through our actions we release those who are bruised and broken from their pain and give them hope of a better life. We do it one person at a time, one day at a time as we seek to reorder social life and social power so that the weak may have a life of dignity, security and well-being. We do it because it is God's vision for our world and we are God's servants called to be about the work of bringing justice for all.

Will we accept God's challenge to be faithful in bringing justice to our world?