

The early Christian Community along with the liturgists who put this passage from Isaiah in our lectionary readings for the Monday of Holy week sense the connection between the “Servant” and Jesus. This passage is the first of 4 passages known as the “Servant Songs” the book of Isaiah. Tomorrow and Wednesday you will hear the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>. And on Good Friday we will hear the 4<sup>th</sup> and final one. These “Servant Songs” are given a prominent place in our Christian tradition. From the first CE century onward, these passages have been interpreted as referring to Jesus and especially the suffering he endured during his ministry and at his death. Hence, we will have the opportunity to reflect on each over the course of this week. This evening, as we take one more step in our Holy Week journey, as we gather together and renew our Commitment to Christian Service, I invite us to hold space open for other possible identifications of the servant.

A brief look at the historical context of the passage allows us to hold open some space.

Modern Biblical Scholars have divided Isaiah into three sections, Chapters 1-23 and 28-33; Second Isaiah (Chapters 34-35 and 40-55) and third Isaiah (chapter 24-27 and 55-66). Our text is a part of 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah and dates about 45 years after the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem by the Babylonian Empire and the deportation of many Israelites to Babylon. This deported or exiled community doubted its status as God’s chosen people and even doubted the sovereignty of God. The unnamed author’s writings seek to assure the exiles both that both the Lord still has compassion for them and that the Lord, despite the triumph of Babylon, is still Lord of the heavens and over history.

I imagine, the experience of being in exile brings up a lot of questions. Especially for a people who remember the stories of their ancestors...the sojourn out of Egypt into the promised land, Their

ancestor David, called a servant after God's own heart. And now the people find themselves in Babylon...Their temple destroyed, their city destroyed, away from all that is familiar...and wondering "are we still God's chosen people."

But I suppose if we think about it, we don't have to stretch too hard to get a sense of what an exile feels like. If we're honest, we've all had exilic phases of our journey. Perhaps for you, it was:

- A relationship that "fell apart" and you doubting if you could ever trust yourself to love again.
- A child who left home and took a path you knew would lead to pain and sorrow and brokenness, and yet no matter how much you tried, there was nothing you could do to prevent it.
- The death of a loved one that left you wondering how to live this life without one who had been a constant companion,
- Hopes, dreams, business ventures, that left you crushed and not knowing what "successful" looked like, but had you sure, at least in that moment that it wasn't you.

I can laugh and joke about it now, but in for me it was August of 2007 when I made the decision to leave DC and move back home to Alabama--I cried. Life was not going as I planned:

- Against my parent's advice, I had quit a full-time job to focus on my seminary studies,
- The jobs I cobbled together to make money while in Seminary didn't turn out as well as I hoped.
- The financial strain put a strain on me, my academic studies, and my relationship with my family.
- The best solution I could come up with was to regroup and take a job back home in Huntsville. I felt like a failure... Was it really

God's idea for me to go to seminary or did I just make it up? If it was God's idea, why can't I finish "on-time" with the others who started with me?

- Yep, I was in exile.

And to the people in Exile, God has a message through the prophet.

- Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nation.
- Even to the in Exile, God sees them, God sees you.
- God takes delight. God's own Soul delights in you.
- I have put my spirit upon him. God has put God's spirit upon you. Upon us.
  - In those moments, when we feel alone, dejected, hurt, when a symbol of our faith, culture, and beauty that has stood for over 800 years burns before our very eyes, God has put God's spirit upon us.
- Of the Israel, God says, he will bring forth justice to the nations.

There is a shit here, a declaration. Not only are the people in Exile seen by God. God reaffirms purpose.

- To bring forth justice to the nations.

Now, I'll concede, this might seem a little absurd.

- The temple has been destroyed.
- The people are in Babylon
- They have no visible power and self-determination;

And yet, God declares they will bring forth justice to the nations.... God further declares through the prophet:

- Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it.
- I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations,
- To open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

That's the thing that amazes me. God can make the seemingly absurd declaration that a people in Exile will bring justice to the nations....Not because of who the people are, but because of who God is and what God does.

- Our God is a God of no matter what...no matter where...
- No matter what circumstances you find yourself in, no matter where in this journey you find yourself:
- God has called you,
- God has taken you by the hand and
- God has kept you!

The Psalms for this evening reminds us what it is about God that calls us, takes us by the hand and keeps us.

- Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds,...How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

It is the steadfast love of God for each and every one of us that allows us to commit and recommit to doing our part, leading and living by example, to bring forth justice to the nations.

Reflecting back on my time in Huntsville, I can see the movement of hand of the God, the steadfast love of God even when I was not steadfast. I got to the place where I found community, a knitting group at a local yarn store, St. Matthew's Episcopal in Madison, AL, and Sue Monk Kidd's the Dance of the Dissident daughter. And eventually in my own way, I heard God's voice again say "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights."

So tonight, this Monday of Holy Week, I invite you to identify as God's servant, to know that:

- God upholds you.
- God's soul delights in you.
- God has put God's spirit on you.
- And by the steadfast love of God holding your hand, You will bring forth justice to the nations. Amen.