

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor
“Vocation: What is God calling you to do and be?”
Isaiah 49: 1-6
2nd Sunday after Epiphany
January 15, 2017

As we gather to worship on this weekend when we commemorate the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., we are confronted with a question: What is God calling you and me to do and to be?

It is a question about our vocation, a word that is derived from the Latin *vocare*, which means “to call.” Frederick Buechner has famously defined *vocation*. He has written that vocation is “the place God calls you to, the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” (1)

To help us grapple with the question, we turn to the Old Testament lesson which the lectionary gives the church for this second Sunday after Epiphany.

Isaiah 49 is the second of four Servant Songs found in Isaiah. Robert read the first of the Servant Songs found in Isaiah 42 last Sunday. The First Servant Song celebrated the patient, nonviolent, merciful ministry who “faithfully bring[s] forth justice” without breaking a “bruised reed” or extinguishing “a dimly burning wick.” “The coastlands wait for his teaching,” God sang in last week’s Old Testament reading. (2)

Today, in the second Servant Song, we hear the Servant’s own voice, singing to the coastlands once again.

Before moving into the Scripture passage itself, it is important, I think, to acknowledge that no one, not even the most sophisticated biblical scholar, knows the identity of the Servant. The Servant may have been an actual historical personage. The term may have referred to the people of Israel as a whole. We do know that Isaiah’s Servant wasn’t Jesus; however, later biblical writers would appropriate the poetry of the Servant Songs and apply it to the self-giving life and ministry of the Christ. It seems wise today to take to heart the counsel that Walter Brueggemann gives in his commentary on this passage: that we give up the quest to identify the historical servant and pay attention only to the imagery and force of the poetry that is found in the song. (3)

What is God calling you and me to do and be?

The Servant sings a powerful song of call, of vocation, in four parts. (4)

I will be reading through the song, section by section, and reflecting on each section in turn.

*Listen to me, O coastlands,
pay attention, you peoples from far away!
The LORD called me before I was born,
while I was in my mother’s womb he named me.
² He made my mouth like a sharp sword,
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow,
in his quiver he hid me away.
³ And he said to me, “You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified.”*

“The LORD called me before I was born.”

Ask almost any minister, “what is the favorite part of your job?” The odds are that he or she will say, “I get to hold a lot of babies in my line of work!” And we do. We not only get to hold them; we are granted the high and awesome privilege of baptizing them. Last Thursday, I got to visit with not just one, but two perfect babies in

preparation for their baptisms: Peter Rathnam who turns six months old today and his parents Lindsay and Lincoln and Kevin Price who turned 7 months old yesterday and his parents Lindsey and Kevin. We will be baptizing Peter next Sunday and Kevin later in February.

When we baptize Peter and Kevin, we will be acting out the poetry of this Servant Song, that before they took their first breaths in this great, big, wonderful, scary world, God named them as God's very own. And when we baptize Peter and Kevin, the church will be saying to them, God not only named you. God has given you a vocation, a calling. You, little child at your mama's breast, you, little child on your daddy's knee, you, little child, being held by the pastor as she splashes water on your forehead at the font, you are called to nothing less than to bring the glory and light of God into view.

"See what love God has for us, that we should be called children of God, and so we are" (I John 3:1) we say as a final blessing upon those we baptize. It is true for every child, for every young person, for every adult. It is true for you and for me. God's love for us is the foundation of our vocation, our calling to nothing less than bringing the light and love of God into view.

But then quick on the heels of the first movement of the Servant Song comes the second movement:

*But I said, "I have labored in vain,
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;*

Currently our Covenant Class and the Men's Friday Morning Study are reading and discussing Jacqueline Bussie's book *Outlaw Christian*. There are so many reasons that I appreciate this book. Chief among the reasons is Jacqueline Bussie's unflinching courage in honestly acknowledging, as the prophet does in today's Scripture lesson does, that no vocation, no calling from God, exists which does not involve seasons of despair and fear. Bussie really grabbed my heart when she wrote of discovering the German word *Weltschmerz* in a novel she was reading. According to Bussie, the word *Weltschmerz* means world-weariness. (5) I think that I'm going to start using it as she does which is to capture how I feel on those days when someone asks me "How are you?" and my newsfeeds just make me feel weary to the bone, when I feel, like the Servant does, that I have spun my wheels and have nothing to show for it, that I have labored in vain and spent my strength for nothing. My mama told me that there would be days like this, *Weltschmerz* days. And there have been for me, and I would bet for you too.

The Servant acknowledges the reality of pain, despair, and *Weltschmerz* in life, but in the third movement affirms that in the midst of it all, our calling, our vocation, our individual calling and our corporate calling, is hope.

*yet surely my cause is with the Lord,
and my reward with my God."
⁵And now the LORD says,
who formed me in the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him,
and that Israel might be gathered to him,
for I am honored in the sight of the LORD,
and my God has become my strength—*

Our vocation is to live in hope, and one of the ways that we do this is to share hope-stories with one another, stories of how God has been our strength in times of pain and despair, stories of how God has been the strength of others in order that those stories may become aspirational stories of hope for us. Jacqueline Bussie invites us to wear these hope-stories as protection against despair the way that police officers don bulletproof vests. (6)

We share our hope-stories, stories like those of Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement, and as we tell and re-tell them, God enlarges our vocation so that we become participants in the renewing of the whole creation.

he says,
"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."

Leymah Gbowee's story is a hope-story.

Leymah Gbowee was active in her Lutheran church in Liberia, St. Peter's in Monrovia. Amid the days of war and oppression under the regime of Charles Taylor, she read the words of Ghandi and the sermons of Martin Luther King, Jr. In the spring of 2002, Gbowee was doing trauma-healing work with women in Liberia. Falling asleep, she awoke from a dream where she says God had told her, "Gather the women and pray for peace

Following a training session in Liberia, Gbowee and her allies, including a Mandingo-Muslim woman named Asatu, began by "going to the mosques on Friday at noon after prayers, to the markets on Saturday morning, to two churches every Sunday." Their flyers read: "We are tired! We are tired of our children being killed! We are tired of being [assaulted]! Women, wake up – you have a voice in the peace process!" They also handed out simple drawings explaining their purpose to the many women who couldn't read.

Working across religious and ethnic lines, Gbowee led thousands of Christian and Muslim women to gather in Monrovia for months. They prayed for peace, using Muslim and Christian prayers, and eventually held daily nonviolent demonstrations and sit-ins in defiance of orders from the tyrannical president.

After sharing the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize with two other leaders of the movement, Lehmah Gbowee was interviewed by Charlie Rose. He asked her, "When your grandchildren ask you, 'What did you do to overthrow the regime of Charles Taylor?' what do you say to them?"

She responded, "I took my pain. I took my fears. I turned it into courage. I mobilized my fellow women and we did what we were supposed to do. We protested. We spoke truth to power. We were able at the end of the day to draw attention to the problems we were facing. If I am asked that question by my grandchildren, then we will be at a place 20 or 25 or 30 years from now, fast forward from now to then, there will be no signs of war anymore. It will be because of the work that we Liberian women did, confronting evil. I tell this story to bring my grandchildren to a place where their fears, their pains, their anger can be translated into something positive to bring change to their community."

What is God calling you and me to do and to be?

Our calling, our vocation, is to take our fears and pain and despair and world-weariness and turn them into courage and hope so that God's light and salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

1. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (New York: HarperOne, 1993), 118-119.
2. Stephanie A. Paulsell, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 242.
3. Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 110.
4. Paulsell, 244.
5. Jacqueline A. Bussie, *Outlaw Christian: Finding Authentic Faith by Breaking the "Rules"* (Nashville: Nelson, 2016), 188.
6. *Ibid.*, 189.