

Servant Songs

TEXT:
Isaiah 49:1-7
John 1:29-34

January 20, 2008

Jesus has grown up quickly since Christmas, or at least the stories of Jesus in this lectionary cycle have propelled us quickly from the infant in the manger just a few short weeks ago, to John's account of Jesus' baptism this morning. Unlike the synoptic gospels, John's account of Jesus' baptism focuses on the proclamation of John the Baptist instead of narrating the scene of Jesus in the Jordan with the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descending from heaven.ⁱ John's account propels the message forward from a static event concerning Jesus alone to the "so what" of the story. John proclaims Jesus is God's Chosen One, the One to whom John will defer and all others should give allegiance. "This is the one of whom I [spoke]," proclaims John, "After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me."ⁱⁱⁱ

Jesus is both servant of God and master of men. John's Gospel draws these parallels using the language of the prophet Isaiah and his Servant Songs to move Jesus forward, move the disciples forward, move us forward from this great Christological statement of who Jesus is to what Jesus – and all who learn from him – will do.

A Servant's Song – What does that phrase conjure for you?

As I read these texts and various commentaries, the passage from Isaiah was repeatedly cited as

the 2nd of 4 Servant Songsⁱⁱⁱ that build on each other throughout the latter portion of Isaiah's Book. To understand the song of a servant, it might help to put the notion of "servant" into context, particularly into the context Isaiah would have known, drawing on specific imagery for those who heard his prophecy first hand.

Frank J. Matera, Professor of New Testament at Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., asserts that there are four ways to understand the servant in the Hebrew Scriptures, with the concept developing and elevating over time, culminating in the Servant presented by Isaiah.

First, from the time the Levitical Law was written, servants were understood as not only subordinate helpers but more accurately slaves – "bought or taken in war"^{iv} – who belonged, as property, to their masters. However, Levitical Law also provided that such slaves or servants were not outside the bounds of humanity. Quite to the contrary, while servants had no legal rights, their religious and cultic rights were not only guaranteed but devoutly guarded. Servants of the Israelite people were to be marked by God (read here circumcised), were to observe the Sabbath (resting along with their owners), sacrifice according to the season and need (be it thanks, atonement, or tithes), and were expected at the Passover

celebration (reminding their Israelite masters that they, too, were once enslaved and to remember how one's servant should be valued and treated).^v

The second understanding of servant is one of self-designation. With the establishment of the Israelite monarchy under King Saul, those who fought in the King's army understood themselves as servants of the King. They were at his command and disposal, humbling themselves below his station, understanding their own station, and ready to give full allegiance to the crown that led them.^{vi}

The third understanding of servant developed along with the religion of Ancient Israel, pointing out servants as righteous and devoted almost unwaveringly to the will of God. As theology was developed among the Hebrew people, psalms and wisdom literature expounded upon, and history recorded, the patriarchs and prophets began to appear in Ancient writings under the title "Servant of God" or "My Servants the Prophets".^{vii} Stories of the righteous and important figures of Israel's oral and now recorded history such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, Solomon, and Job,^{viii} all carried the honorific designation as God's Servant. Add to that the growing and evolving understanding of servant that comes from Levitical Law and political norms, and the weight

of such a distinction becomes all the more clear.

Finally, with the latter prophecies of Isaiah, the fourth understanding of Servant culminates in the designation of God's ultimate Servant, the servant who redeems God's people and who redeems all of creation. Isaiah sings the Servant's wandering song starting in the 42nd Chapter and ending in the middle of the 53rd.^{ix} The identity of this ultimate servant continues to be debated. Historians claim the song is for Hezekiah or Jeremiah or even Isaiah, himself, as the tribulations of the Assyrian and Babylonian Exiles come to a close, restoring Israel back to the Promised Land from which she was ripped. Indeed, the dating of this portion of Isaiah's book coincides with the Edict of Restoration decreed by Cyrus the Great, who overthrew the Babylonians and began the Persian Empire, sending the Israelites back to Judah with only a condition of tribute to pay for the Empire's protection and good graces.

However, religious scholars take issue with the currency of such an interpretation, claiming instead a more futuristic and over-arching salvation message in the Servant Song than merely a historical record. Jewish scholars view the Servant of God as the entire nation of Israel, the one "whose mission it is to redeem the nations"^x having now been redeemed itself. While Christian scholars draw the conclusion that the salvation message in the Servant Songs is blatantly Messianic, pointing to Jesus, the Messiah, an understanding and image that John the Baptist picks up on when he alludes to and quotes

from Isaiah's Servant Songs in his proclamation following Jesus' baptism on the banks of the Jordan.^{xi}

And so we hear the Servant Songs in this morning's Scripture
 – the Song of My Servant the Prophet, says God
 – the Song of God's Servant Israel, say the scholars
 – the Song of the Servant of the One who was before me, says John the Baptist
 – the Song of the One, God's Servant, Our Lord the Messiah

And we are asked, I'm asking you, to think a moment about these songs and what it means to be in God's service, to be a servant of God.

Now, think about the songs of other servants. Using the four aspects of a servant laid out in Scripture – servant as slave, as humble, as righteous, as redemptive – who displays your ideal of "servant"? What song would you hear or see lived out in his or her life?

Do you see perhaps Mother Theresa working tirelessly among the poor in India or her Carmelite namesake Therese of Lisieux who believed in the simplest form of servanthood, scattering flowers that were, as she said, "every little sacrifice, every glance and word, and the doing of the least actions for love"^{xii}?

Think about it a moment. Who comes to mind for you?

What characteristics or actions in that person's life sing of slavery, humility, righteousness, and redemption?

What characteristics or actions

in your life sing of slavery, humility, righteousness, and redemption?

What is your Servant Song?

I've joked for years that I have the world's weirdest juke box constantly running in my head. As I tried to answer this very question for myself, I was stunned to hear the song that was playing across my mind. It's a song from Rogers and Hammerstein's *Cinderella*, at the part of the story when Cinderella's Fairy God Mother appears to help her get to the ball. Cinderella protests that such a feat is surely impossible. Her Fairy God Mother replies: *Impossible for a plain yellow pumpkin to become a golden carriage. Impossible for a plain country bumpkin and a prince to join in marriage. And four white mice will never be four white horses. Such fol-de-rol and fiddle-dee-dee of courses. Impossible! But the world is full of zanies and fools who don't believe in sensible rules and won't believe what sensible people say and because these daft and dewey-eyed folks keep building up impossible hopes impossible things are happening everyday.*^{xiii}

I hear, as a part of my servant song, the call to dare to try the things that seem crazy and impossible, to believe that God can do anything through me that God desires to do if I give it a chance, and that by pushing the envelope just a little bit, remarkable, impossible, impractical dreams can truly become a reality in my life and in the lives of others. I hear through the simple silliness of Cinderella's Fairy God Mother a faith in letting go of the notions and limitations I am so sure of in

my life and allowing for the possibility that with just a little risk, huge, amazing things can happen.

In our Gospel reading, John breaks through the limitations imposed on the banks of the Jordan River. John pushes story forward, propelling Jesus and the disciples beyond a limited act (a regular ol' baptism in the Jordan river) to the impossible – seeing that the Messiah has come and joining in the service that God asks these people to provide. John pushes the story forward, propelling Jesus and the disciples right to work, into impossible work, impossible lives, impossible servanthood full of impossible tasks – like renewing Israel and redeeming the nations – and impossibly full of despair and frustration as people misunderstand and reject their message. The only reward for these servants is the renewal of faith and strength that can only come from God, passing through the Son to the Disciples who become the Apostles who then pass the faith further on through the generations to those of us sitting in this congregation today. The faith that caused Andrew and Peter, that caused John the Baptist and causes all the baptized, to take that leap forward, propelled at a frightening speed, into the risks, dangers, and joys of serving our Lord.

“Impossible! ... Impossible things are happening everyday!”^{xiv}

For today at least, that's my Servant Song. What's yours? What song is playing in your mind and humming in heart, shouting from your soul and causing your spirit to dance?

We have this whole new year before us.

The sentimentality and stress and joy and peace of the holiday season is over. The somber, cold of late winter and the reflective time of Lent are quickly coming upon us. We hear Isaiah's prophecy. We hear John the Baptist's proclamation. We hear the Servant Songs playing, intertwining, harmonizing, swelling —

as we are called to lift our voices today and sing along, to find our song, find your song, greet the opportunities before us, and get swept away by the energy that propels us at an alarming rate. We are called to dare the impossible and the frustrating even as we affect redemption around us compounded by grace, love, peace, and righteousness, knowing that God leads us and pens the score just as God did for Isaiah, just as God did for John and John the Baptist, just as God does for all God's children in every time and place.

Servant Songs.

A Servant's Song.

What is your Servant Song?

I remember another song I learned on *Sesame Street* long ago and far away. I'm sure it comes from somewhere else, but that's where I remember hearing it:

Sing! Sing a song. Make it simple, to last your whole life long.

Don't worry if it's not good enough for anyone else to hear. Just sing ...

Sing to the Lord. Your song may not make sense to me. My song may seem utterly ridiculous to you, but it's the purpose – the service, the humility, the

righteousness, the redemption – the attempt to do God's will – that defines each of our songs. We don't sing for each other. We sing for our Lord – in our work, in our prayers, in our dreams, and in our lives.

Just sing — Sing a song. Sing **your** Servant Song, this day and in this season and year to come, to the glory of God – in the name of the One – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

**This sermon delivered by
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i. The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version (New York: HarperCollins Publishers) 1993, *footnote* p. 2015.

ii. *Ibid.*, John 1:30.

iii. *Ibid.*, *footnote* p. 1083.

iv. The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary, Paul J. Achtemeier, ed. “Servant” (HarperSanFrancisco) 1996, p. 1000.

v. *Ibid.*

vi. *Ibid.*

vii. *Ibid.*

viii. *Ibid.*

ix. *Ibid.*

x. *Ibid.*

xi. NRSV, *footnote* p. 2014.

xii. Thérèse de Lisieux, accessed 19 January 2008, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Th%C3%A9r%C3%A8se_de_Lisieux].

xiii. Cinderella: Original Cast Soundtrack, accessed 18 January 2008, [<http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/cinderellaoriginalcast/impossibleitspossible.htm>].

xiv. *Ibid.*
