

“A Light to the Nations”

Valley Presbyterian Church – December 16, 2108

Third Sunday of Advent

Psalm 126

Rev. John Wahl

Isaiah 42:1-9

This morning’s reading is from a section in the book of Isaiah that speaks of God’s servant. Some people understand that God’s servant is the nation of Israel – the chosen people who have suffered in exile under the neighboring Babylonian Empire. Others read these verses as being descriptive of God’s Messiah – the anointed one who will come to save. When we read this passage in the season of Advent, we acknowledge that most Christians consider Jesus to be the fulfilment, the embodiment of God’s servant described in Isaiah.

The authors of the New Testament intentionally echo these words of Isaiah when they talk about Jesus: who came not to be served, but to serve; who came to bring justice by setting the prisoners free and restoring sight to the blind; Jesus, who is the light of the world. God’s chosen one is not a powerful, wealthy ruler, but a humble, gentle servant who will not be heard shouting in the streets and would not injure even a bruised reed.

But before exploring the identity of this servant Isaiah describes, let’s take a moment to remember the story that has brought us here. After being held in bondage in Egypt, God heard the cry of his people and delivered them to freedom; made covenant with them and brought them through the wilderness and into the land of Canaan. They became a nation and built a Temple for the Lord. For centuries, they saw ups and downs; experiencing military victories and defeats under judges and kings. They would stray from God’s covenant, but the prophets would call them back.

Then, in the sixth century, BCE, the unthinkable happened. The Babylonians defeated Israel; they destroyed the Temple, plundered Israel’s treasure, and took them back to Babylon in chains. The defeat was absolute; this was the utter and complete devastation of all the political, social, economic and religious life that God’s people had known for centuries.¹

How could their God, their mighty deliverer, allow this to happen? Had God abandoned them? Separated from their land and Temple, were they still God’s

¹ Amy Oden from *WorkingPreacher.com*

people? As exiles, they were tempted to believe that God had withdrawn favor and allowed their conquerors to punish them for their sins and disobedience.

But yet again, it is the voice of the prophets who call the people to return to God, to reclaim their inheritance as a light to the nations. According to this prophet of Israel's exile, writing over five hundred years prior to the birth of Jesus, Israel was in need of a servant to do the work of God on earth.

Isaiah proclaims that this God, who had been leading them for so many generations, acts in several particular ways. First, God will send a servant, and not a conqueror or a tyrant. This agent of God be a liberator like God, one who will bring justice *for* the oppressed instead of domination *over* the oppressors.

Second, God works to bring justice 'in the earth;' that is, justice will come to all people, everywhere. God sends this servant to persevere until justice is brought even 'to the coastlands' (v. 4) – in other words, as far as and beyond what the eye can see.

Third, God's people are again to be '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.' (v. 6-7) God calls his people to righteousness not for themselves alone, but for the nations – the weak and the powerful. Israel reminds his exiled people that God has not abandoned them, but is at work among them; just *not only* for them.

And so, the question remains: is this servant a people or a person; is it the nation of Israel, or is it a long-awaited savior? And, beyond the identity of the servant, perhaps an equally important question is 'what the servant is called to do?'

The first few verses of Isaiah 42 make it clear that the main work of this servant will center on justice. Three times in the first four verses, the word 'justice' rings out. This was a trademark calling of the prophets; most famously, Amos describes the need for justice to 'roll down like waters;' claiming that Israel required nothing less than a purifying deluge of justice if it were ever to become the nation that God intended it to be. Likewise, Isaiah foretells that God's servant will make it his primary business to bring forth and establish justice on earth.

Justice is the chief sign of a nation that has been blessed by God: where people enjoy access to goods and services of the nation; where people understand that their primary goal is the welfare – the *shalom* – of all their neighbors; where people know that when any member suffers, all suffer. When Isaiah announces that the servant of God will be a light for the blind, surely he means the blindness

of injustice; an imprisonment in darkness that will be illuminated and removed so that the people might live at last in the light of justice.²

For Isaiah, the hope for the world rests in his people, his exiled people who soon will be released from Babylon and allowed, after forty years of captivity, to re-enter Canaan – the land of promise. Out of their trauma, out of their bondage, out of their darkness; they will become the bearers of God’s justice to the world.

Imagine, if you will, that we, too, have been called to this justice-bearing work. Though Christians come to a covenantal relationship with God later than the Jews that Isaiah is speaking to here, we might nonetheless consider that God has also called us to be his servants; that we may also be light to the nations, joining with our Jewish sisters and brothers in the blessed work of bringing peace and hope to the world.

If we are to take on this task, it is worth noting that the servant who bears God’s justice is not loud or forceful; instead tending carefully to bruised reeds, dealing gently with flickering candles. In other words, God’s servant takes care not to further wound those who have been injured, or to extinguish hope in those who are in despair. God’s people do not trample the weak, but nor will they be trampled by the mighty. They will bring justice with a patient, gentle, unstoppable resilience.³

This may be the ultimate measure of God’s goodness; the purity of divine justice: that the light of the world chooses not to quench even a dimly burning wick, instead calling us to protect and encourage even the smallest of flames. Too often, in our human interactions, we come up with reasons to walk past those with faltering wicks; we find ways not to see them, excuses not to stop, pause and shelter their tender flames. Too often, we act out of efficiency and expediency; too busy to remember to stop and look for people whose candles are sputtering, whose wicks are in need of trimming.⁴

God’s people, working for justice, help to remind us of those people whose light needs tending; whose lives can benefit from our loving care. I am reminded in this season of asylum seekers who are sitting in prisons and detention facilities, on both sides of our border. I see the reports of starving children in Yemen who are innocent pawns in a geo-political war. But, I also picture the families who will have presents under the tree, and food on the table, because of the tags that you

² John Holbert, “The Very Definition of a Servant” from *patheos.com*

³ Robert Williamson, “Advent in the Eyes of Isaiah”

⁴ Marci Glass, “Flickering Hope”

took off the Angel Tree. And I think of students in Cleveland who, because of this church's generosity, will this week receive the gift of having at least one decent, warm pair of socks to wear.

As we sit in this season of the year with the least amount of daylight, what can we do to help others tend to their flames? We are like a string of lights, or a gathering of individual candles – some burning strong and others dimly lit – that can do a lot when they work in concert. Together, we can be bearers of God's justice; small reflections of God's great and powerful love. Together, as God's people, we are called to bring light and life to the world; for, as we wait for the coming of Christ, God is waiting for us to be a light to the nations.

In this winter of long nights and short days, let us look for the light, and to be the light. Let us care for and protect the light burning in others by participating in God's desire for justice. With our own, sometimes fragile, candles may our work and witness join together with our sisters and brothers of this and every faith; to be the light that shines on the world like the long-awaited dawn. Amen.