

¹ 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 nations. ² He will not cry out or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street; ³ a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. ⁴ He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; the coastlands wait for his teaching. ⁵ Thus says the Lord God, 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: ⁶ 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 and a light to the nations, ⁷ to open eyes that are blind, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. ⁸ I am the Lord; that is my name. My glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. ⁹ See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God.

All: Thanks be to God!

Isaiah 42:1-9

01/11/2026 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

The Servant

Pastor Amy Terhune

James Merritt tells about a first-grade teacher, who asked her class the question: "What do you do to help at home?" One by one the answers came back. One little girl said, "I dry the dishes." One little boy said, "I feed the dog." Other children spoke up, "I sweep the floor", "I make my bed", "I help my dad put away the laundry". Everybody gave an answer – everybody except one little boy sitting in the back. He didn't say anything. The teacher looked at him and said, "Johnny, what do you do to help out at home?" And Johnny said, "I stay out of the way." [from "At Your Service Lord" by James Merritt, www.sermons.com.] Which broke my heart. Mostly because I remember how hard it is to be a parent, and I remember times when I, in my stress and my exhaustion, said to my girls, "Just let me do it and get it done!" Which is the worst thing I could have said in those moments, because here I had two sweet little girls who just wanted to help. All of us need to feel that we matter, that we have some purpose, that we can do some good. We're not called or created to stay out of the way. Jesus understood himself to be a servant, and those of us who follow him understand ourselves to be called to service as well.

The scripture lesson today from the 42nd chapter of Isaiah is understood by many Christians to be a prophetic hymn about the Messiah. This is what the Messiah will be like. And certainly, there are portions of it that we clearly identify with Jesus – a light to the nations, one who opens the eyes of the blind and sets the prisoner free and brings justice to the nations. Jesus will indeed

embody all that this lesson describes. But if you read along in Isaiah, in chapters 40 and 41, which precede this chapter, you'll discover that there is a trial, of sorts, going on. Israel, in exile, is being called to account. The nation has seen their capital city burned to the ground, their leadership carted off hundreds of miles and pressed into the service of an oppressive regime. And yet, despite their sin and their loss, Israel is also being assured of God's ongoing presence with them in exile, and even of God's promise that their national story will continue in time. The servant being called out and called up is Israel itself. They are God's servant – the whole people. And we who read it all these centuries later are clearly meant to number ourselves among these people. We, too, are servants, called by God to embody something new.

The first thing we notice is that the spirit is upon the servant to bring forth justice, but not by brute force. Isaiah puts it this way: He will not cry out 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; he will faithfully bring forth justice. Think about that imagery for just a moment. Reeds are plants that stick up out of the water near the edge of a pond or a lake. What difference does it make if one gets bruised or bent out of shape? A dimly burning wick is nearly out of fuel. But the servant is gentle with what is already fragile. Indeed, that is the servant's strength. The servant won't snuff out a flame barely holding on, and he won't break what's already wounded. Paul Robinson explains it like this: "The servant of God, those called by God's name, will not be loud and pushy; they will protect all life, even fragile, insignificant-appearing life, as an act of obedience and love for the Creator of all life." [from "The Sacred Other" by Paul E. Robinson, www.Sermons.com.]

But even more, and equally important, the Servant of God won't snuff out hope. This is a good news for a people living in exile as they were during the time of Isaiah; or a nation under Rome's thumb looking for their Messiah as they were in the time of Jesus. And it's good news for us today. There are people who want us to believe that our best hope is our military, or our democracy, or the latest technology. Someone once asked Bishop William Willimon if it wasn't true that the greatest hope for the church and the world was the young people coming to Christ in droves. And Willimon said, "Absolutely not, that is heresy, plain and simple. The greatest hope for the church and the world was and is and forever will be the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the ongoing movement of the Holy Spirit in God's world." He's not wrong. But hope can be fragile. Sometimes it's hard to see God working.

Deon K. Jonson is a black, gay, immigrant from Barbados who is an ordained priest in the Episcopal Church USA. I met him at an event in Ann Arbor back in 2007 or 2008 when he was serving as the Rector at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Brighton, Michigan. Today, he's the Bishop of the Missouri Diocese of the Episcopal Church. Earlier this week, I published one of his prayers on my Facebook page. It goes like this:

Holy God, I am tired!
Tired of the fear-filled news,
Tired of the cruelty toward neighbors,
Tired of the deafening silence from leaders,
Tired of being always on edge,

Tired of screaming into the void,
Tired of holding hope against despair.
Meet me in my tiredness, oh God.
Meet me in the ache of these long days
And breathe your strength into my bones,
For the sake of your love. Amen

I have prayed that prayer more times than I can count. It feels very real to me. In this past week of violence and shootings and threats of war, I feel keenly this call in my bones to live gentleness. And I remain convicted by scripture that the greatest strength any of us can show is gentleness, compassion, kindness, love. I long for a gentler world, and a kinder one. But as God's servant, it is my call to live what I long for. So despite being tired, I will do my best to be kind, to hold out hope, to use my voice carefully, to live true righteousness (not self-righteousness) and to trust God's working even when I can't see it.

King Duncan tells a beautiful story about Paul and Margaret Powers. It seems that when Paul was just seven years old, "...his mother died of pneumonia. After his mother's death, Paul's father became an alcoholic, and began beating Paul. As he grew, Paul joined a street gang and spent much of his time in stealing and street fights. At the age of twelve, Paul killed a woman. It was an accidental death, but due to the other factors in his life, he spent the next four years in a juvenile prison. When he turned 18, he was released and put into the care of an elderly couple called Mom and Dad Adams. The Adams loved Paul despite his violent temper and rough ways, and they offered him a second chance. Through their faithful influence, Paul gave his life to Jesus.

"A few years after devoting his life to Christ, Paul met and fell in love with a young woman named Margaret. Now, Margaret loved Paul, too, but after learning about his rough background, she was not sure about marrying him. So one day, Paul took Margaret walking on the beach. Margaret remarked that just as the tide was washing out their footprints, maybe their relationship would soon be washed away too. But Paul assured her that he was fully committed to her for life. Whatever he said to her that night convinced her that he was a new man in Christ. That night they became engaged, and when Margaret returned to her room that night, she wrote a poem about trusting God, even when you can't see him working. That poem has inspired millions. You may know the poem as "Footprints." [2 ¶s from Mike Trout, *Off the Air* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), pp.4-23; as used in "One Life to Live" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com. Adapted here slightly.]

Paul Powers did not become the kind of man that Margaret could love because he made up his mind to do so. Paul Powers was changed by the power of Christ's love, because God called him, took him by the hand, and kept him. And God does the same for you and I if we let Him. Friend, you are chosen. You are loved, precious, a delight to God. And you are the ones God will work through. Just as the ocean is actually made up of single water molecules, so the Kingdom of God is made through simple, gentle, quiet works of individuals souls who trust God and aren't content to just stay out of the way.

So let me close with a story Paul Robinson tells about Doug Nichols, who was a missionary in India in the mid 1960s. While there, Nichols caught tuberculosis, and wound up in the hospital in India. Over there, the hospital is basically one big room with a few dozen beds. Nobody had an individual room or even a semi-private room like we do today. 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 nobody took him seriously when he tried to talk about the love of God. 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. Nichols 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. He ended up going in his bed, producing an awful smell throughout the ward. The nurses were upset, and kind of surely as they cleaned it all up, and the poor man, embarrassed and ashamed, 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. But this night, Nichols pulled himself out of bed himself, and carried the dumbfounded man to the toilet, a small room with a simple hole in the floor. When the man back to bed, he said something, but not speaking the same language, Nichols really had no idea what it was, but you can probably guess the rest. The story spread around the hospital, and suddenly, there were a lot more people willing to hear more about the love of God. Not because Nichols had grown any more eloquent overnight, but because he took a poor man to the bathroom. He treated him like a sacred child of God. [4 ¶s from “The Sacred Other” by Paul E. Robinson, www.Sermon.com.] Nichols stopped talking about faith, and instead lived it. It’s easy to think that we should keep our head down and stay out of the way. It’s easy to think that what we do doesn’t matter. And maybe it’s more comfortable too – a way to free ourselves from having to do the hard work of serving God. But when we become the servant God calls us to be, when we live kindness, practice gentleness, love like Jesus, some will notice. Maybe it will boost their hope. Maybe it will be balm to the soul. And maybe, just maybe, it will be God’s grace – the opening we need to share the good news of Jesus Christ. If that scares you, if that makes you tired, I get it. But I pray that it will energize you more than it scares you or wearies you. And above all, I pray you’ll follow in the way. Because you matter. You make the difference. You are God’s servant. And without you, the whole world is less than it could be. Believe it, my friends. Amen.