

You Are To Be

Cycle #2 – Session #4

You Are To Be...

Text: Isaiah 42:1-12

Gathering

Opening Worship

Light a candle as a reminder of God's presence

Song: *In Loving Partnership* -- #497 *Chalice Hymnal*

Litany

All humankind are one vast family, this world our home.
We sleep beneath the same roof, the starry sky.
We warm ourselves at the same hearth, the blazing sun.
Upon one floor of soil we stand and breathe one air
and drink one water and walk beneath the same moon.
We are the children of one God
We are brothers and sisters of one blood.
And members of one worldwide family of God.

On your world, Lord, your love descend.
On your church, Lord, your love descend.
On all who work, Lord, your love descend.
Where there is strife, Lord, your love descend.
Where there is neglect and hunger, your love descend.
On those who are greeting the morning,
And those who are now in the middle of their day,
And those who are ready to go to their rest,
Your love descend. Surround each person with your care.

Amen

Holy Island Prayer Book, adapted.

Welcome One Another. Spend a few minutes in conversation about a need you have seen this week, a kindness which someone did for you, something for which you were thankful.

Cycle #2 – Session #4

Scripture

Isaiah 42:1-12

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.
He will not cry 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.
He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

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.
I am the LORD, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to idols.
See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth,
I tell you of them.

Or from the Message

¹⁻⁴ "Take a good look at my servant.
I'm backing him to the hilt.
He's the one I chose,
and I couldn't be more pleased with him.
I've bathed him with my Spirit, my life.
He'll set everything right among the nations.
He won't call attention to what he does
with loud speeches or gaudy parades.
He won't brush aside the bruised and the hurt
and he won't disregard the small and insignificant,

but he'll steadily and firmly set things right.
He won't tire out and quit. He won't be stopped
until he's finished his work—to set things right on earth.
Far-flung ocean islands
wait expectantly for his teaching."

¹⁰Sing to the LORD a new song,
his praise from the end of the earth!
Let the sea roar* and all that fills it,
the coastlands and their inhabitants.

¹¹Let the desert and its towns lift up their voice,
the villages that Kedar inhabits;
let the inhabitants of Sela sing for joy,
let them shout from the tops of the mountains.

¹²Let them give glory to the LORD,
and declare his praise in the coastlands.

The God Who Makes Us Alive with His Own Life

⁵⁻⁹God's Message,
the God who created the cosmos, stretched out the skies,
laid out the earth and all that grows from it,
Who breathes life into earth's people,
makes them alive with his own life:
"I am God. I have called you to live right and well.
I have taken responsibility for you, kept you safe.
I have set you among my people to bind them to me,
and provided you as a lighthouse to the nations,
To make a start at bringing people into the open, into light:
opening blind eyes,
releasing prisoners from dungeons,
emptying the dark prisons.
I am God. That's my name.
I don't franchise my glory,
don't endorse the no-god idols.
Take note: The earlier predictions of judgment have been fulfilled.
I'm announcing the new salvation work.
Before it bursts on the scene,
I'm telling you all about it."

Dwelling in Scripture

1st reading - Allow people time to reflect on what they have heard.
Note the word or phrase which drew your attention this time.

2nd reading - Invite people to talk about what they have heard and
where it might intersect with their lives.

Behind the Text

There is a man who goes to my church who quite regularly says he thinks we should disregard the scriptures and use literature which is understandable and relevant to our times or words to that effect. My reply is that as I on the other hand have studied the scriptures more deeply I find the meaning grows richer and richer. I do understand some of his frustration. Take this passage for example. One, it is not easy to understand. Two, our reading of it will always be colored by the way in which it has been connected to Jesus and the Good News of God. Three, there is far more we can't know about the writer and the setting than we can. Having said that, however, this is a passage which has many riches and will bring many gifts to us.

What can we know?

- 1) Historical time period.
Several historical events appear to have taken place. According to Bernard Grun's, *The Timetables of History, a Linkage of People and Events*, Nebuchadnezzar II burned Jerusalem in 581 BCE. Cyrus II the Great of Persia conquered Babylonia and freed the Jews from Babylonian Captivity and aided their return to Israel, thus ending their exile. In reading the text there is a presupposition the Neo-Babylonian Empire has collapsed and "*the former things have passed away.*" The judgment which was pronounced in Isaiah 6 has come to pass and now comes the time to hear about forgiveness and new things.
- 2) It seems quite certain that the writer of the chapters after Isaiah 39 was not the same as the person who wrote up to that point, but it is easier to refer to him as Isaiah than any other title. While there does come a point when he speaks in first person, in this passage he serves as God's voice and remains largely unseen behind the text.
- 3) Beyond those few scraps what we can know about this chapter will rest largely on our being willing to explore and listen to the text. Like most texts, our understanding of this one will be shaped by our own experience of God, of the place of Jesus in our lives, and our willingness to let the words lead us rather than our trying to lead the words where we would like them to go or imagine they are going.
- 4) In one of my other careers I taught English and Literature. I noticed when students were being asked to consider a piece of poetry, some of them responded very positively and seemed to find layer upon layer of meaning behind the few words the poet had written. Others kept wanting to find the literal truth and in poetry that often isn't possible. I suspect poetry is the language of the right side of the brain. For me it is best read at least in part intuitively, to allow

the music of the words to touch my being, and not spend too much time trying to get at the meaning of every word or ever reference, particularly when there are some of them that are lost somewhere in time.

5. This is the first of three servant poems in which the church has seen a description of who Jesus would be. At the same time, it is quite clear the writer was writing about a person in his own time and place. Because of who Jesus was, his followers looking back at the text understood him more deeply through these words.

Now for one more topic which affects how I read this passage. While this poem is indeed beautiful, for most of us servants are not part of our everyday life. For nearly ten years my husband and I lived in India where our lives were in many ways made simpler by the presence of two servants, a cook cum general handyman, and a woman who helped take care of our children and kept the house reasonably clean. For the most part I love having an automatic washer, dryer, vacuum cleaner, and access to super markets. However, none of those were available and having servants in India meant I could run a guest house and also work while other people took care of other tasks.

The experience was highly educational. First, while a servant had certain responsibilities, so does the employer. As part of the agreement the employer was expected to furnish two meals per day plus tea, afternoon and evening. There was also an expectation that at least two sets of clothing would be provided, pants and shirts in the man's case, saris and blouses for the woman. If a servant were ill, or members of the servant's family needed medical care, it would be provided. In most places housing was not part of the package, although the wage needed to be sufficient to maintain a place to live. If the servant were working away from home, then the employer would need to provide housing. If there were children, a good employer also made sure they had an opportunity to go to school. In exchange for these things plus a salary, the servants did the work for which they were hired. Sometimes the servants would decide that a request had not been reasonable or that there was a better way to do something. In which case they might very well do what they thought was needed, not necessarily what had been requested. Or there might be some conversation in which they explained why it ought to be done their way, not yours.

One ritual which helped me understand the relationship was the morning greeting. When servants came into the house in the morning he or she expected to be greeted with the word "*Namascar* or *Namaste*, depending on the language area. That word can be translated many ways, but my favorite is, *the spirit or breath of God which is in me, greets the spirit or breath of God in you*. In that greeting there was an acknowledgment of the relationship and awareness that both are equal before God. That is a pretty mundane picture against which to view this servant poem, but it does lift up that the employer does not own the servant and that each partner has a distinct part in fulfilling the contract or in Israel's case, the covenant.

Observation

In many ways the opening scene of this poem is very foreign. Not only is it in an entirely different time and place, the setting itself is outside our experience. While there are people who have witnessed the splendor of a royal court and most of us have seen

pictures of such and perhaps seen the relics of past kingdoms, this is not a part of our every day experience. But this is the context as we listen. The context of a trial with testimony being presented to the heavenly council continues. The nations and their imitation gods are now silent and the Holy one now addresses his testimony to Israel.

God's servant is introduced. This idea of servant isn't new. In the previous chapter the writer has reminded the listeners that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as well as their descendents were connected to God through the covenant relationship. All who are assembled in this place are introduced to the one who will establish "justice in the earth."

Consider

Look at these first four verses. What is the picture of God's servant? Cyrus who like Abraham had come out of the east and freed the exiles might have been seen as having at least some of these characteristics. He is described as being the instrument of God and at least from the perspective of the Exile brought justice in allowing them to return to their homeland. But this servant is very different than the one who came with the power of an army.

Observation

Mispat, justice, is a key word in this whole passage. The servant will bring justice. The covenant which God made with Abraham and his descendents has not yet been fulfilled, but it will be. The image of justice being established upon the whole earth is, I suspect, something like the Kingdom of God about which Jesus spoke so often. It had not come and yet is in our midst.

Consider

One of the key ingredients in Shalom is justice. Peace is not a cessation of war and disagreements. It takes place when each and all are treated as persons of value and the decisions made are made for the good of the whole, rather than the few. As you look at our time and place where do you see justice? Where is it missing? Is there a connection with the covenant of Jesus' forbearers as well as Jesus and is there some way in which the followers of Jesus become a part of fulfilling the covenant?

Observation

Once the servant has been presented to the heavenly council, God turns and speaks to the servant. But before anything is said, there is a reminder of who God is. *God is the one who created the heavens and the earth, gives people breath and spirit.* Something I was reading recently suggested that we pause and consider that the air we breathe is the same air Jesus breathed and for that matter the same air goes to the very beginning of the world, animates all living things and is a constant witness to the amazing creation of which we are a tiny piece. It is this God, before whom the nations are silent who now speaks to the servant.

Consider

Spend a few moments considering the creation? How does it speak to you? Do you ever take time to be silent in God's presence and simply recognize who God is?

Observation

So far, God has told the council who the servant is and we have been reminded of who God is, a living God who is not only the source of all that is, but the protector of the people and indeed the whole creation. Now God speaks directly to the servant and lays out the task. No doubt the task is daunting and will be only possible with God. The servant is to be a light to the nations. At this point you may begin to be aware that "the servant" is not only a person, it is also Israel. This passage will seem very familiar. While not exactly the way the text reads in Luke as Jesus rises to read in the temple, we hear the words...to free the prisoners, releasing those who are bound in darkness.

Consider

When my home church was trying to figure out how to put into words what we understood our mission to be, they found it very difficult without writing a book or using language that would just befuddle us. After nearly a year of study and with the help of one of our retired clergy, it was written this way. *"Our purpose is to continue in our time what Jesus began in his – working for the healing of our world as an inclusive, compassionate, joyful community."* As you consider the above passage, also reflect on the way in which that covenant continued in Jesus and how do you see yourself and others carrying out this work.

Observation

I suspect the people of Isaiah's time had only to look around and see that what God promised had not yet taken place and that is God's promise. Surely Jesus' followers during his life time and since have also faced this problem and worked to help make that a reality. It appears that each of us is to take up this covenant and the role of servant and continue what God is doing. It also appears that we are each to carry out that servant role in unique ways, being who we are and doing what we can do.

Consider

How might you be called to serve? What opportunities do you have? Mother Theresa was very clear that not everyone was called to do what she did. When asked, she said, *"Begin where you are."* You become this person you are called to be as you live with your family and do what you can in your community, in your church, with whatever opportunities come to you.

Observation

As the old things pass away and the new things come to be, a natural response may be to *"Sing to the Lord a new song."* Praise is not only an appropriate response, it is one that comes naturally. And it is not only human beings that are to offer praise, but the whole earth and the whole creation are to respond. Most of us are very aware of the polluted condition of much of our earth. In fact we don't have to look at the hole in the

ozone or all of the dire predictions about rising seas or species disappearing or terrible storms to know that there is something very wrong. In many places hikers have to go high into the mountains to find potable water. More and more children suffer from respiratory problems. Plants and animals struggle to survive. Many of the world's people live in refugee camps and some children grow to adulthood without ever knowing a time when they are not living in the midst of war.

Consider

In such a world, what might be the source of a “new song”?

E. Stanley Jones who spent most of his life in India as a missionary knew Mahatma Gandhi, who never became a Christian, but who in many ways shaped his life around Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount* and who brought a new song of freedom to the people of India. Jones once asked Gandhi what advice he would give for indigenizing Christianity in India. The advice he received was

- 1) Start living more Christ like lives.
- 2) Practice your faith without blurring it or watering it down.
- 3) Emphasize love because that is the central point of Christian faith and therefore the decisive motivating force.
- 4) Study non-Christian religions with great sympathy so you can appeal to people of others faiths more effectively.

This advice seems to me to be perhaps just as appropriate for us in our time and when we are living in a world that is rapidly changing and in which we may be the only “servant” people encounter.

Activity (Optional)

Spend some time individually and then perhaps in your group. Make a list of the persons who have been light for you. And perhaps also make a list of persons the whole group has experienced as having brought light into the darkness. Then make a second list. Who are the persons for whom you may be a “light bringer?”

Practicing the Presence

Scripture - Isaiah 42:1-12

- 1) How many people do you see each day? A few? Many? People in India have a simple way of acknowledging God's presence and spirit in each person they meet. Is there something you can do either in your greetings or in your thinking in order to remind yourself to see the face of Christ or the Spirit of God in each person you encounter? How might this affect how you treat others? Yourself, since you also carry that same spirit?
- 2) Continue the practice of scripture reading. Choose some word or phrase to carry with you. The focus for the coming session is Ezekiel 37:1-14

Suggested Reading Pattern

- 1st Read and listen to the text. Notice phrases that seem familiar or stand out for you. You may want to read it out loud or you may want to read it with someone else.
- 2nd Choose a word or phrase to carry with you and reflect on it as it comes to your mind through the day. (If you read at night – let the word or phrase rest overnight and pick it up in the morning. Remember the pattern of creation – “evening and morning.” You may receive fresh insights when you waken.)
- 3rd During the week read “Behind the Text” and the “Observations/Consider” on the text. Even a few minutes spent each day or several times a week, will enrich your experience of the study and the experience of your small group.

Closing Worship

Words to carry with you -

Each day we are being made new... that is if we choose to allow God into our lives and risk the changes that may lie ahead. If we choose to cling to the past, the future will be closed to us.

Prayer

Notice the person on your right and on your left. Hold them in prayer during this week. As part of that what will you ask others to pray for on your behalf? What prayer do you have about your church? Share those requests with one another. What one thing are you thankful for this day?

Unison response (Unison)

Always keep God’s peace and love among you, and when you have to seek guidance about your affairs, take great care to be of one mind. Live in mutual goodwill also with Christ’s other servants, and do not despise Christians who come to you for hospitality, but see that you welcome them, give them accommodation, and send them on their way with friendship and kindness.

Cuthbert (7th Century Irish Saint) Last Words

Blessing (Unison)

**Creator of night and day
Lead us from dark to light
Lead us from ugliness to beauty
Lead us from stagnation to creativity
Lead us from ourselves to you.**

Celtic blessing from Holy Island Prayer Book

Song: *Lo, I Am With You -- #430 Chalice Hymnal*