

2nd Sunday after Epiphany – Year A
Lutheran, Radcliff, KY
Isaiah 49:1-6
Pastor Paul Horn

January 20, 2008

Faith

Listen to the Servant of the LORD

I. His work may appear in vain...

II. But He has completed salvation

Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: Before I was born the LORD called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name.² He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver.³ He said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor.”⁴ But I said, “I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing. Yet what is due me is in the LORD’s hand, and my reward is with my God.”⁵ And now the LORD says— he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength—⁶ he says: “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”

Let’s say that two seminars are offered at the Elizabethtown Community College, both entitled, “How to be a Successful Growing Church.” The one seminar is led by the senior pastor of a congregation which first met in 1781. This pastor has led the church for 10 years, has 5 additional ministers and 16 administrators on staff to assist him as he oversees the 1300+ members. The congregation has recently built a \$13million facility, with indoor and outdoor children’s playgrounds, state of the art audio/visual in the sanctuary, 2 services are offered on Sunday morning and one Sunday and Wednesday evening. Children’s programs are offered during each of those services. The church has a mom’s group, singles’ group, family group and senior adults groups. The other seminar is offered by the pastor of a church which has been in existence for 12 years, led by a young pastor who has been in the ministry for almost 4 years, he is the only one on staff. The congregation he serves has 124 members and the people worship in a rented facility. The congregation offers only one service on Sunday morning, Sunday school for children and adults and another bible class on Wednesday morning and evening. The church has family fellowship activities and a Women’s group.

Which seminar would you attend? You might be more willing to listen to the tenured pastor of a larger church. In our lesson this morning from the book of the prophet Isaiah someone says to you and me, “Listen to me! Hear this!” Like our reaction to the thought of attending a church growth seminar given by a rookie pastor of a small congregation we might ask this speaker, “Why should we listen to you? Why are you so important? Who are you anyway?”

The speaker identifies himself, “**Before I was born the LORD called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name.**” (vs1) I am special. The LORD, the God of free and faithful love, the God who keeps all of his promises, divinely appointed me to be

who I am from the time I was in my mother's tummy, even before my birth! The LORD himself identifies me as his servant (vs3) who will faithfully and willingly carry out his commands.

But what is so special about this servant and his service to the LORD that we should listen to him? He spoke of his birth. Certainly he did not come into this world with much flair; born to virgin mother in a barn, wrapped in strips of cloth and laid in a feeding trough filled with straw. His life had humble beginnings; lived in the back country town of Nazareth as the son of a carpenter. And if you examined his life as the Servant of the LORD, it's filled with disappointments, as he himself says in vs4, **"I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing."** Jesus, the Servant of the LORD, no doubt experienced frustrations during his earthly ministry. He proclaimed to his own people, the Israelites, that he was the Servant of the LORD that God had promised through the prophet Isaiah. But his own countrymen did not believe in him. The religious leaders openly opposed him. After three years of sermons, teaching, healing, praying it came to this; abandonment by friends, betrayal by one friend in particular, death on a cross and burial in a borrowed tomb. In the end it all seemed to be unprofitable. He appears to have failed - why listen to him?

Even his own apostles and the prophets who went before him experienced the same frustrations in their ministries. The Apostle Paul had to deal with the problem-prone Corinthians and Ephesians and a timid Pastor Timothy. Jeremiah bemoaned the fact that the LORD had called him to be a prophet. Elijah lamented, "Why should I go on preaching? I am the only one." And even today, don't you, his prophets, experience the same frustrations in your ministries? I know that I do at times.

Every week I share, with an average of 65 people, not my words, but God's Words, and what he says about the importance of faithful participation in worship and the Lord's Supper, the importance of regular Bible study. And I see that there are some who listen and are eager and willing to do what God's Word says, but there are others who seem to not care, who blow it off as optional. It gets frustrating. The elder and I call and visit delinquent members. We show love and concern for them. Some listen, but others don't seem to care that they are missing this communion of saints and more importantly participation in the Sacrament which refreshes their souls. It's frustrating. I teach children and teenagers what God, not me, has to say about respecting not just their parents, but other adults, like teachers and their pastor, but they continue to have bad attitudes, are disrespectful and rude. And I ask myself, "Then why bother? Why even try if they will not listen?"

In your ministry, you invite your friends, coworkers and neighbors to church. But they make excuses, "It's a storefront church. I don't do church. I can worship at home." And inside you scream, "If they would just try it out so they could hear the Word so that it could take root in their hearts they would see and experience the same joy that I get from the gospel!" And then there are others who don't even bother with the invitation, "I'm too shy. I'm not a people person. It's someone else's job. It's the pastor's job." And all the while God has been saying to you over and over again, "No it's not. It is your

responsibility. Christ has called all of you to bring others to the Word.” Or when some lost soul finally comes into contact with the life-giving Words and they don’t immediately respond we grow impatient. The Word does not work as quickly as I want it to. We become angry. And our attitude is, “Why bother?”

Because we become impatient, apathetic, pessimistic, and even angry in our ministries the Servant of the LORD comes to us with the word of his mouth, described in vs2 as **a sharpened sword and a polished arrow.**” The faithful Servant of the LORD strikes your conscience with the accuracy of a flawless, straight arrow, and cuts your heart with the sharpness of a two-edged sword. Through his Word the Servant of the LORD tells you and me that we have been unfaithful servants. We have not trusted the power of his Word. We have grown impatient with his timetable. We have been timid and weak. We have failed to listen to him. Deep down inside we know he is right because his words cut us to the heart.

The sword of his mouth speaks to us again, not to strike us with his judgment, but to apply healing salve, “Where you have been faithless, I am faithful.” (2Timothy 2:13) Where you and I have failed, the Servant of the LORD was successful. Although his birth and life were humble, although his ministry seemed evanescent and his death appeared to be in vain, God said of his Servant, **“I will display my splendor in you.”** (vs3) God the Father was glorified by the way his Son performed his ministry. Although Jesus experienced frustration, disappointment, resistance and blatant unbelief, he never once complained, never showed impatience, not once displayed unholy anger. He was never ashamed to share his Word of truth. He always relied on the power of his Word. He used his Word as an arrow to shoot his life-giving message into the hearts of men and women, even until he breathed his last. Where we have been unfaithful servants, he was the faithful Servant of the LORD.

But his ministry was more than being a prophet. The LORD said of him, **“It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”** (vs6) The suffering Servant of the LORD did not die in vain. He was the priest who brought the sacrifice to the altar of heaven before God’s throne. As John the Baptist said in the gospel this morning, **“Look, the Lamb of God who takes away sin of the world.”** (John 1:29) Not only was he the priest, but also the sacrifice. As he hung on the tree of Calvary, the guilt of the world’s sin cut his heart like millions of swords. God’s anger over the world’s sin pierced his heart like arrows shooting into his body. Satan laughed and his own people taunted him, “If you are the Christ...” and more swords and arrows pierced his soul.

But the suffering and death were not in vain. The bloody sacrifice lifted his head on the cross and raised his voice one last time, **“It is finished!”** His work as the Servant of the LORD was done. And God smiled. All payment for sins was complete. Salvation was won. To prove that his work was not in vain the Servant of the LORD raised himself from the grave. The Servant of the LORD accomplished this salvation for all people through his life as our Prophet and his death as our Priest. He has saved you.

Now he uses the same polished arrow and sharp sword of his mouth to penetrate to the inner most part of your soul to impart salvation. Listen to these Words from your Servant, because nowhere else does he personally convey this forgiveness to you than in his Holy Supper, “This is my blood and my body, willingly offered for you, in your place, for your forgiveness.” All of your sinful attitudes toward ministry have been pardoned. Through the Lord’s Supper the Servant of the LORD gives you his faithful life and his complete sacrifice. Because his life and death are yours the Servant of the LORD gives you a special status. This morning in the Second Lesson he said that you have been **sanctified in Christ Jesus**. (1Corinthians 1:2) *To be sanctified* means to be set apart as holy. The Father now sees you as blameless because you have been made holy through Christ’s life and death. The Servant of the LORD won salvation for the world, for you. That’s why we listen to him.

Listen to what he says to you now, “**Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.**” (Mark 16:15) He now commands you to carry out your work as his servant. He gives you the same tools he used during his ministry; the sharp sword and the polished arrow of his Word. Your job isn’t to accomplish salvation for lost souls. That’s already been done. Your job is to shoot the arrow of his Word into the hearts of men, women and children and then to be patient as it carries out its powerful work. Some of our own members were on the church’s prospect mailing list for 5 years before they became members of this congregation. Some of our members came up to me the very first Sunday they visited church and asked, “How can I become a member.” But we won’t always be able to tell these success stories. When you are disappointed and frustrated to no end, listen to the Servant of the LORD. Look at his ministry. Do you remember when Jesus sat on a hill outside of Jerusalem and wept and said that they wanted to gather Jerusalem together in his arms as a mother hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but they were not willing (Matthew 23:37-39). There will be those who are not willing to hear what you have to say. When that happens, listen the Servant of the LORD. In Isaiah 55:10-12 he reminds us that his Word will not return empty but will achieve the purpose for which he sent it.

The Servant of the LORD tells you, “Be faithful.” (1Corinthians 4:2) Find strength and empowerment through his Word and in the Sacraments. Ask him to make you a willing servant, as Andrew was, who, when Jesus called him, the first thing he did was to run and find his brother Simon (from the Gospel this morning John 1:29-41). And in the end, when we stand at the throne of our King, we will lay our trophies at his feet. And he will say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” (Matthew 25:23) May the Holy Spirit move you to always listen to the Servant of the LORD and to follow his direction as you serve him. Amen.

In His Service,

Pastor Paul Horn

Faith Lutheran Church
549 N Wilson Rd
Radcliff, KY 40160
270-352-4545
www.faithinradcliff.org