

## “Servants Washed in God’s Breath of Heaven”

### Isaiah 42: 1-9

This past week our world remembered a wonderful man, Nelson Mandela. At his memorial service, people of power came from all over to pay their respects to this man. Since his death, Mandela’s life story has been retold and has been lifted up as an example of how one can overcome racial intolerance, how one can overcome hatred, and still not lose one’s humanity. Mandela’s life has become a testimony to how one can change the world through kindness, gentleness, perseverance and still not give into the image of power and might. Our world is definitely mourning the loss of this amazing man and not long after his passing, the question was already beginning to circulate, “Who is going to come along and fill his shoes?” This is such a timely question-given our journey through Advent. But I wonder if there is not a deeper longing behind this question, a deeper longing that goes beyond just who will be the next great leader for our world.

During this time of Advent, we are also wondering when Christ will return and bring the vision of God’s peaceable kingdom to fulfillment. Our hearts are longing for our Savior.

So it is no surprise that amid our Advent journey, I came across an article that caught my attention because it jarred me so much. It named our hearts’ true

longing. The article was a critique on how the media has handled Mandela's passing. And it said all it needed to say in its: "Stop comparing Mandela to Jesus."

The article went on to say, "Mandela's greatness is not in doubt. His ability to work with and, apparently, forgive those who incarcerated him for 27 years in appalling conditions does conform to behavior we might characterize as saintly. He also had a radiant presence in public, one that entranced all who witnessed it. Yet political history should also warn us never to confuse the public and private man.

And then what is fascinating is that the article went on to share an interview with former President Jimmy Carter about Mandela's life, work and legacy. Carter was asked what he thought about the comparison between Jesus and Mandela, to which Carter responded, "there is no comparison, given Jesus' divinity...and I certainly wouldn't compare any human being with Jesus."

As I read this article, in light of this week's text, I could help but think that we have been doing just that and somewhere along the way, we got our definitions of Savior and God's servant a little mixed up.

Let me explain: When we read these words from Isaiah, as Christians, we read them through the lens of our experience with Jesus Christ. We see Jesus when God talks about a servant bathed in the Spirit of God. We immediately think Jesus when we hear the words, a servant washed in God's transformative power.

These words from Isaiah remind us of Jesus because they remind us of what we have experienced, what we know, what we believe about our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

However, when this text was written, Jesus was nowhere around. Jesus wasn't even a glimmer in Mary's eyes yet. The original context of this text is in no way a reference to Jesus. In fact, if we take another look at the text, the servant is never named or identified.

In reality, this text is about an unnamed, unidentified servant of God, who is bathed in God's Breath of Heaven, a servant who is washed in God's transformative power called to do God's Kingdom work in the world. All we really know about this servant and his mission is that God has a powerful resolve to do a new thing and the servant is the means by which God's newness will be implemented. All we know about this servant and his mission is that God has called upon someone to make things right among the nations. All we know as we look at this text from Isaiah is that God has called someone to be God's servant for the people of God. This leaves the door wide open. Our wonderings are full of possibilities on just exactly who this servant of God may be. Who is Isaiah talking about in this text?

Well, as we read farther along in the Book of Isaiah, we realize that this servant who God calls is certainly not who we expected him to be. In fact, this

person is also not the person the people of Israel expected him to be either. This person is completely beyond the people's expectations and catches them by surprise. Isn't it just like God to do something like that? God is always surprising us, keeping us on our toes. Why God even came to the world as a baby in a manger so why should we be surprised that God calls a leader that doesn't fit the people's expectations? God's done it before so why shouldn't God do it again?

So back to our text At this point in our text, when Isaiah is telling the people that God has called forth a servant, servant in whom God is well pleased, the people began to look around at all those gathered there, and begin to wonder just who this person could be or might be. Now the people's action may take us by surprise but the people of Israel were used to it. God had always called forth servants from among the people of God to lead the people of God: Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Solomon, the prophets. Israel's history is full of stories of how God had called forth servants to lead the people and now it seemed that God was getting ready to do it again. The difference this time was the people's circumstances. They were no longer sitting safely within their own borders of the promised land that God had given them. Now, the people of Israel were in exile, in Babylon of all places and they had been waiting for a long time. The people of God had been hoping and praying for God to send someone again, someone who would set them free once more. They had been wondering and waiting for the next person

to come along and fill the past leader's shoes and once more lead the people of God.

So, like I said, when Isaiah said that God had called forth someone, the people were not that surprised. Thankful, yes, joyous, yes but not all that surprised. God had been doing things like that all along. So now that the people knew God was going to call forth someone, the only thing left to decide was just exactly who that person would be. Who would be the next person to lead the people? Who would fill the shoes of the great leaders of the past? Who would be this Servant of God?

So as the people are wondering who this servant of God will be, we as readers are reminded of something. We are reminded that God has a sense of humor. Sure enough, just like God promised, God lifts up a servant but it is not the person that the people of Israel expected nor would this person have ever been the person the people expected. This person wasn't even a part of the Israelite nation. This person was an outsider. This person was someone that no one in their right minds would have called to do something great for the people of Israel, because he just didn't fit the people's expectations.

That someone who God lifted up, who God said in whom I am well pleased, this person who God bathed in God's Spirit, was King Cyrus. God chose King Cyrus, King of Persia to set the people free. God chose an outsider. God chose a

Gentile. God's spirit came upon King Cyrus soon after he defeated the Babylonians and he made things right among the nations. He let the people of Israel return home.

This is what I love about this story. It doesn't fit the people's expectations. It flips our notion of who is in and who is out upside down and it doesn't just end with the people of Israel going free. God goes several steps farther and answers the people's questions. God gives them a mission and reminds them of their calling, their calling that is so much more complicated, their calling that is much more work than making things right among the nations. God calls the people to be the people of God once more. God calls them to them to be the people that God created them to be once more.

Yes God called forth servant, a servant bathed in God's Spirit but God didn't stop talking at that point. God didn't stop at that one promise. God keeps talking and in doing so issues a wake up call to Israel and the people of God.

In verses 5 and 6, we can feel a switch in the audience. We realize that God is no longer talking to just the servant while the people look to this person. God is now turning God's attention to the wider audience. God has turned God's attention to the people of God and God wants them to pay attention. God says, "Don't think just because I have called up a servant that you have no responsibility in this new thing. Don't think that this servant is going to do all the hard work alone. All of

you, as my children, have the same breath of heaven within each and every one of you. This Servant of mine has a job to do and as my children, as my servants, so do you.

God turns to the people of God and says, “ Your job as my people is to remind all the people of the world of God’s love and grace. Your job as my people, as my children, as my beloveds is to be a light for all the people.

God is reminding the people of Israel that they are also called to be God’s servants. They entered into a covenant with God and they are in relationship with God as well. They don’t get a get out of jail free card. God has some expectations for the people of God and now is the time to start meeting those expectations.

This is a huge shift in thinking for the people of God. They were so used to God calling up one person to lead. But now, God is telling them that they had been getting it wrong for generation after generation. God had been calling all of them to be God’s servants. God is reminding them that they are all bathed in God’s Breath of Heaven, washed in God’s transformative power. No longer is it up to just one person to lead and change the world. It is up to all of them as the people of God. The servant is supposed to get the process started and then the rest is up to the people of God. No longer one Servant of God, but many.

Sounds familiar right? We are all used to thinking that phrase, servant of God describes someone else, someone that is certainly not us, someone who has

more gifts than we do, someone who is more faithful than we are, someone who fits that mold of a “perfect person of God” better than we do.

Well, here is the kicker. We are all called servants of God. We are all bathed in God’s breath of Heaven. We all have God’s Spirit poured out over us. We all have God’s creative power residing within us. And we are all called to embody God’s Kingdom mission, a mission of justice, a mission of grace, a mission of love. We are all called to embody God’s Kingdom mission in and through our own lives. Not just a few select people but all of us as the people of God.

In this text, Isaiah reminds the people that now they are free and now is the time to get to work. Now is the time to start setting the prisoners free from the dark dungeons that prevent the light of God from coming into their hearts. Now is the time to open the eyes of the blind. Now is the time to be a light for all the people of God. Now is the time to bring together this broken and hurting world by being a light of hope, a light of peace, a light of healing for all of God’s creation.

As Christians we believe that God lifted up a servant for us as people of faith, in the one we call Jesus Christ. And that was just the beginning. God continued to bring the Kingdom of God among the people through the people of God. The rest of this process includes us becoming true servants of God as instruments of wholeness and liberation.

That's the key! God doesn't care who does the work just as long as the work is getting done. God is going to call whoever God needs to call to make sure that God's transformative work in the world is happening. God is going to call people we admire. God is going to call people whose work will go unnoticed. God is going to call the people of God to be the servants of God. Just look at our story as the people of God: God called the powerful. God called the meek. God called people like King Cyrus, people like the prophets of old. God called a young woman named Mary. God called fisherman to be his disciples. Our very story tells us that God doesn't care who it is, just as long as the work is getting done, just as long as whoever it is does God's transformative work in the world.

God is going to call the servants of God to embody the way of the Kingdom in and through their lives. People like Mandela. People like Dorothy Day. People like Martin Luther King. People like you and me. All of us are God's servants. All of us are bathed in God's breath of Heaven. All of us are washed in God's creative transformative power. And the world is waiting for us to get to work.

In seminary-

God has lifted us up to be God's servants. God has bathed us with God's breath of Heaven, with God's transformative power. And now it is time for us to get to work.

The thing we need to realize is that yes, the Servant in our text was never officially named but the servant can be identified by three things. One, this servant was loved by God. Two, this servant was inspired by God's Spirit. And three: this servant was sent into the world to share God's light of grace and love.

All things that can be said of us as people of faith and more importantly, should be said of us as children of God. There are no more excuse. There are no more reasons why we can't be the person God calls us to be. No longer can we sit around waiting for someone else to step up and fill the position of leader, to fill the position of servant of God. Now is the time for us to be a voice for the voiceless, a heart of compassion for the hurting, and a light for all nations

God has given us all we need. God has equipped us with God's Spirit, with God's creative transformative power to do what this world say is impossible. God has taken responsibility for us. God has claimed us and named us. God has lifted us up to be God's servants in the World. And the world need us more than ever. Not because we need people to fill the leaders of the past shoes. But because we need to honor their work, all of their work as we realize our potential to build societies of justice and equality for all the people of God. We need to claim our part in something that is bigger than we are because we know there is something more available for all. We have the potential to be the person God created us to be. We have the potential to be the person God calls us to be. We simply need to claim

what God has given us already. We are servants of God washed in God's Breath of Heaven, ready to be instrument of healing and wholeness for God's creation.

Today May we leave this place, renewed, committed and inspired to participate in God's redemptive and transformative work in this world, all because we understand God doesn't call the qualified. God qualifies the call. Amen.