

SERMON SERIES

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BEHOLD MY SERVANT

Isaiah 42:1-4

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Today is the third Sunday in Advent. In just over a week it will be Christmas. It is common for preachers and politicians at Christmas to focus on world peace. After all, didn't the angels sing 'Peace on earth and good will ...' We love to think of that World War 1 event in 1914 when the Christmas Truce began on Christmas Eve along the British and German lines around Ypres in Belgium. Christmas is the time we try to be nice to everyone, to speak of peace and good cheer, while we share a beer. Reality is, everyone would love for an end to suffering and the depression so many feel. We long for leaders who could actually bring about peace, not just a feel good at Christmas. But many worry 'We have politicians aplenty, but where are the strong visionary leaders?' We want leaders who can lead, who are strong and capable. Trouble is the strong types can end up being arrogant with illusions of grandeur. The leaders that are nice and caring are often seen as being weak. They might intend well but achieve little. But then even if we do find good strong leaders what can they really do about hurricanes, volcanos or earthquakes? The person would have to be God!

The human situation hasn't changed much over the centuries. Sure, our technology changes rapidly. And Christendom is gone. But our human nature and the issues we struggle with don't change. Here in Isaiah we see a people longing for a leader, for someone to take them out of their hopeless situation. In the time Isaiah writes, Judah is powerful, wealthy and influential. But it is spiritually decadent. The rich get richer and the poor are oppressed. Isaiah predicts that in 130 years' time God's people will be in exile, their nation wrecked. But then from chapter 40 onwards Isaiah prophecies how God will 'comfort' his people and bring salvation. But it's not in the way people usually expect. In chapter 41 we have a court scene. God calls the nations to come before him and give an account. He brings two groups of nations; those from the east (Babylon) and those from the coastlands. In other words, those in the west around the Mediterranean Sea, so Greece, Rome. The issue in the court scene is: who can bring justice in the world? Who can set things right? Now, the people groups God challenges include those upon whom our culture is based; the law of the Romans, the philosophy of the Greeks. At Isaiah's time the Greeks were in their Golden Age with their

philosophy and Rome was established shortly after. These nations are called upon to give a solution to the problems that face humankind. How can we heal a broken, suffering, struggling humanity? And we see they have nothing to say. These are the great thinkers of their age, the people upon whom much of our western thought is based. They have no answer. We still have no answer in our secular culture. God gives his verdict in 41:28-29: "I look but there is no one – no one to give counsel, no one to give an answer when I ask. See, they are false! Their deeds amount to nothing, their images are but wind and confusion." No, the greatest of the world's nations, thinkers and leaders have nothing so say.

But another figure is introduced into the courtroom: the 'servant of the Lord'. Look at Isaiah 42:1. God through his prophet says to his people "Here is my servant..." Actually, the English is not strong enough here. God does not just introduce his servant. He commands the people to look at him and 'behold' him. "Behold the servant of mine"! In other words, 'Don't stare in gloom at your situation. Don't look down at your despair. Look up! Look! Look! Behold my servant! Fix your eyes on him! There is your answer! Trust him! What makes this 'servant' so special is his relationship with the Almighty. He is the 'servant' or even 'slave of God'. He does only the bidding of God. He is one who is very unique. He is God's 'chosen one' in whom God says he 'delights! This very special person, says God, will have 'my Spirit' Note verse 1 "I will put my Spirit on him..." In other words, 'He will live my life. He will breath my breath. And I God Almighty, I will personally support him.' "He is my servant whom I uphold". So, this servant will have the strength of God and with that power he (:1) "will bring justice to the nations". He will take hold of all that is evil and deal with it! He will take hold of all that causes suffering and hunger and bigotry and terror and racism and persecution, and death- and overcome it. In other words, he will crush sin and evil. 'Oh, my people; behold my servant! Behold your salvation! Behold Emmanuel, your God with you!' The Hebrew poetry lifts our hearts as we behold the majesty of this amazing servant.

But now, as we look at how this servant acts we are touched by his gentleness. Look at 42:2,3 "He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out". Now get this: Here is the 'servant' of God, so God in all his power, "to bring justice to the nations", yet "he will not shout or cry out or raise his voice in the streets". He does not shout against oppression. Or scream out for revenge. He does not demand, or posture. He will not put his fist on the table. He is in sharp contrast to the loud worldly conqueror who has heralds proclaim his deeds to all, shouting in the streets. In those days when a new religion was presented to a people, it was forced on them by the conqueror. But the 'servant' of the Lord does not force his way on anybody. He works quietly and gently by

the Spirit and the power of God. In fact, the sensitivity and gentleness of the 'servant' are extraordinary. "A bruised reed he will not break and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out". The 'reed' referred to, grew in the marsh on the river bank. It is, in itself, very weak. But it has also been 'bruised' or broken, probably by an animal trampling it. The 'smoldering wick' or 'smoking flax' is simply a wick that is burning and is now practically extinguished. Just the last puff of smoke is left coming off it. They are things so weak that simply having a person walk past will finish them off. Yet this servant says Isaiah, is so gentle that he will not "...break the bruised reed or snuff out the smoldering wick".

The symbolism of the 'reed' and 'wick' refers to people who are so weak, so broken and exhausted that all their hope for anything better is practically extinguished. They are on the edge of total despair. The Hebrew word for 'bruised' can also mean 'oppressed'. It pictures people so battered that they cannot defend themselves in any way. In our day it might refer to the person who feels so guilty about what they have done they feel there is no way God would accept them. Perhaps life has given such a battering that the person is totally devastated. Or it can refer to the person whose faith is almost overcome by doubt. The 'servant' of the Lord in his tenderness comes and brings hope and justice even to these powerless and broken people. He is so gentle with them because he himself knows their weakness. He knows personally their pain and struggle. For, you see, this 'servant' is not a hero who works from on high, safe in his own place. Rather he identifies with the weak. He becomes like them and works for justice with them. Isaiah says in verse 4 that "...he will not falter or be discouraged." The Hebrew can read '...he will not be dim or bruised'. In other words, the words describing the 'reed' and the 'wick' are also used to describe the 'servant'. He has become as weak as those suffering. He is going to be oppressed and his life snuffed out. But he will not be completely 'crushed' because, remember, he is 'upheld' by the Lord. He will bring justice not by force and violence, but by 'faithfulness', by obedient 'service' to the Lord. And, note, he "...will not falter". He will do it!

You all know who this 'servant' is. His name is Jesus. Philippians 2 puts it so well when it speaks of Jesus: "Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man he humbled himself and became obedient to death even death on a cross." No heroics from the safety of heaven. The Son of God lived with us beginning life in a cowshed, a baby born in a stable. The King of the world ignored by the world as a 'nobody', insignificant, one of the 'weak'. Matthew quotes this Isaiah 42 passage in full in chapter 12 to show that Jesus is the fulfilment of the prophecy. And he does it in the context of

comparing Jesus with the Pharisees. The Pharisees placed big demands on the people. They emphasised the law and keeping the law. They crushed the people with their wrong expectations. They gave no time for the weak and the poor. There was no grace or mercy. 'Obey the law or be damned'. But in response Jesus is shown as the one who gave strength to the 'weak' and called on those who were 'weary'. "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." Jesus 'healed the sick' and sought out the 'tax collectors and prostitutes'. He 'fed the famished', 'comforted the grieving', 'cheered the fearful', 'reassured the doubters', and 'granted pardon to those who came to him in repentance'.

You might wonder who the 'weak' people are today. Assume it's all of us. Oh, we might be well educated middle class people, successful in our trades or professions, earning well, lovely homes. But deep inside we are as fragile as any one else. So often what pushes us to strive and achieve is our insecure being deep inside that longs to find its place, to be loved and accepted. Egos so fragile that all it takes is a wrong word to discourage us and depress us. Bodies so weak all it takes is a micro organism to lay us out. The gentleness of Jesus is something we all need, even if we don't admit to it. Here is someone who will listen to us, whatever it is we feel the need to talk about. He will always receive us and never push us away. He will never say 'Not now' as we finally get the courage to admit our deep inner needs and our sin. Jesus does not put on conditions 'I'll help you if, or I'll love you if...' He does not see our weakness as an opportunity to use us or manipulate us; 'Do it my way or I will leave'. Everyone who comes to Jesus, no matter your background, no matter how big your sin or how little our faith, even if we struggle a lot with doubt and our faith is but a smoking wick, Jesus will receive us. He will never ignore us or brush us aside. No snide remarks that crushes our broken spirits. No pressure that extinguishes our joy.

I pray to God that we as a church will do the same for each other and for the Hills communities. Because we as church, we are now the Lord's 'servant'. We are the body of Christ; we are the voice and the hands of Jesus. Jesus was 'incarnate' God who came into our lives, and got involved with us. We too must follow the 'incarnation principle' and be involved in the life of the Hills communities. We must not preach to them from the safety of our church. We are called to be involved in their lives. Not just those we get on with. But like Jesus, seeking out the weak, the hurting, the crushed. May we 'behold the servant', keep our focus on Jesus and learn from his gentleness, because it does not come to us naturally. Our own memories are filled with the moments of that sharp bitter tongue that cut deep into our own soul, crushing a breaking relationship, extinguishing a smoldering faith. May our hearts and lives be open and sensitive to each other! And as we find joy in the tenderness of Jesus may we share it with others.

This Christmas the greatest gift we can give is the hope and joy that comes in Jesus. May our gentleness show his gentleness. May our compassion show his compassion. To bring hope to the Hills they must 'Behold the servant', they must see Jesus. For the Hills to see Jesus we must be like him: striving for justice, strong with the arrogant, tough with the sinner, but oh so gentle and tender and caring with the broken. This Christmas may people see the Christ, and in seeing him long for him to come again with a world that is finally at peace.