

Sermon Resources / Exegetical Notes

The lessons for this second Sunday of the Epiphany are well suited to our RSVP effort, and the theme, *“The Church’s schools of Higher Education Prepare Strong Servants.”*

- In the appointed psalm (Psalm 92:1-5) we hear the inspired writer remind us that it is good “to proclaim your love in the morning, your faithfulness at night.” A similar idea is echoed in the Introit, where the psalmist says, “I do not conceal Your love and Your truth from the great assembly”. In the antiphon we read, “I do not hide your righteousness in my heart; I speak of your faithfulness and salvation.”
- In the Epistle (1 Corinthians 1:1-9), Paul gives thanks that his preaching has been accepted by the Corinthians, and that the truth of the Word of life was evident in them.
- John has been teaching His disciples, and proclaims the greatest lesson of all, as he points to Jesus as the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Andrew’s response to Jesus shows the eagerness of those who hear that message - he goes and finds his brother and tells him, “We have found the Messiah!
- the Old Testament lesson, sometimes referred to as the Great Commission of the Old Testament speaks of the Servant who has been set apart to bring light to the Gentiles.

In these lessons, the proclamation of the Word as God’s light and salvation is central. We have chosen the Old Testament lesson, based on the second of Isaiah’s Servant Songs, as a way of reminding ourselves that God has called His Church to bring that light to the world, and that we do that as those sent out as servants of The Servant. Through our RSVP efforts, we seek those who will be trained and prepared to be strong servants who carry that message to the world and who will “prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.” (Eph. 4:12)

Exegetical Notes:

v.1 Much has been written about the identity of the Servant in this text. In the New Testament, the Servant of Isaiah refers to Jesus. What is said of the Servant is so unique, so glorious, that it reaches far beyond the call and performance of any individual, and surely beyond what we see as the reality in the nation of Israel. Jesus is the embodiment of the true Israel. He is the One set apart from the foundations of the world to be God’s salvation for the nations.

The call is an aspect that can be pursued here - the Lord speaks in similar ways of the call of Jeremiah (Jer. 1:5) and of Paul (Gal. 1:15). He continues to call those whom He will use to proclaim His message of redemption.

V.2 Like the double-edged sword which came from one “like a son of man” in John’s vision in Revelation (Rev. 1:16; 2:12, 16; cf. Eph. 6:17, Heb. 4:12), the Servant’s mouth is like “a sharpened sword.” As it comes from the mouth, the sword is associated with the Word of God, both the word of authority and the word of judgement.

It has been said that speech is the most God-like faculty in man. The mouth is used to announce the good news of Christ, the Eternal Word. However, mouths must be surrendered to the Lord.

The “polished arrow” reminds us of God’s arrows of judgement (Deuteronomy 32:23, 42). Both the sword and the arrow are ready for use, kept for the time of need. Through His Word, God defends and delivers those who are poor in spirit, while that same Word cuts down those who are opposed to Him.

V. 3 The Servant is the true Israel, who achieves the Lord’s purposes and brings glory to God. That purpose is set forth in v. 6. The triumphant Christ commissions His church to carry out that ministry.

V.4 The task of the Servant is not always successful and often marked with disappointment. But there is confidence in the gracious God who will be His reward. The resurrection vindicates Christ’s work, a vivid reminder that God is pleased and has accepted the sacrifice of His Son for the redemption of the world.

In the same way, the Church continues on, confident that God will give success. (Ps. 31:23-24). His Word will always accomplish what He desires. (Is. 55:11)

v.5 God’s assignment for the Messiah begins with the restoration and redemption of Israel. Commentators note that “to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself” is a prophecy regarding the restoration after the Babylonian captivity. There is a greater deliverance and restoration, from the power of sin – and this sets up the greater plan of God, that extends to the whole world.

V.6 It is too small a thing to redeem only lost Israel. The work of the Servant (that same work carried out in the church today) reaches out to the Gentiles and to the very ends of the earth. The church, through servants who are strengthened by training and education in the Word, goes forth to bring His Light to the nations. This work, so powerfully completed in the Suffering Servant requires more than an individual in the church, or even a whole congregation. It is our work together that enables us to prepare workers who will preach, teach, encourage—and help others serve the Lord with their gifts.

Sermon for January 20, 2002
Second Sunday after Epiphany (Series A)
Title: Think Big!
Text: Isaiah 49:1-6

¹ 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 splendour.” ⁴ But I said, “I have laboured 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 honoured 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.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

A man went up to a workman at a construction site and asked, “What are you doing?” The man replied, “What does it look like I’m doing? I’m laying bricks.” The man went to the man next to him and asked, “What are you doing?” The man replied, “I’m constructing a wall.” He went down to the next man and asked, “What are you doing?” The man replied, “I’m helping build a cathedral to the glory of God.”

Three men, all doing the same task—but one of them could see beyond the bricks and mortar. He was thinking about the wonderful cathedral that would be the end result of all the work. He is the kind of workman employers want—a worker who “thinks big”. If a bricklayer can see himself building a cathedral to God’s glory, then surely that church which is ***built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone*** will also want to think big—to think of all that the church, empowered and strengthened by the Holy Spirit, can do to the glory of God.

God wants His church to ‘think big’. In these Epiphany days we remember that the Lord of Glory has burst into our world in human flesh and blood, to make known His salvation. God’s plans and purposes encompass nothing less than the salvation of the whole world. John points to Jesus as the ***lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world***. Isaiah speaks of the Servant of the Lord, who will bring salvation to the ends of the earth. And God has entrusted His

church with the responsibility of making make His salvation known to a lost and dying world, as He empowers us by His Spirit to bring His light of life to the nations.

Our text today is sometimes referred to as the Great Commission of the Old Testament. It is just one of many places in which the Scriptures remind us that God wants to reveal His love, His grace and His salvation to the whole of lost and dying humanity. From the very foundation of the world, God had planned the salvation of all who would believe. It was never just about Adam and Eve, who are the first to receive the promise of a Saviour from sin. It was never just about Abraham, with whom God made His covenant. It was never just about Israel the chosen people. God's purpose is far greater than that. Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord speaks to His Servant—or perhaps it would be better to say that the Lord speaks of His Servant, for the only One who can live up to the call and expectation of our text is the Messiah, Jesus Christ. In His grace and mercy, the Lord of All reaches out to all, saying to His Servant: ***“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.”***

How blessed we are that God thinks big! We hear John say it again: ***“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”*** God's plan involves not just a few people, but all people. Jesus comes to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom to the people of Israel—but He reaches out beyond the borders of Israel. He offers living water to a Samaritan woman of questionable reputation. He heals the servant of a Roman centurion—and commends the centurion for his faith. He casts a demon out of the daughter of a Canaanite woman—and praises her faith, too. When the loving arms of Christ are outstretched on the cross, it is for you, for me and for all people. Through His death and resurrection, Christ is God's salvation of the earth. He is the light of life for Jew, for Gentile, for all who believe in Him.

The need for that light is as great as it ever was. There are many still lost in the darkness of sin and death. The turmoil and uncertainty of this world continually remind us of the terrible power of sin at work in the hearts of people everywhere. The struggles we see in our own lives remind us that we, too, are affected by sin's power over us. Only God's forgiveness brings light to the darkened heart. Thankfully, the Servant who is the life of all continues His light-giving ministry through His church. Peter reminds us: ***“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”*** We are charged with His commission: Think big! Bring My light to the very ends of the earth. What an awesome responsibility God has given to us! Unfortunately, it

often seems to be more of an impossible goal. For most of us the idea of sharing our faith with the people around us seems overwhelming to us. How can even begin to think about making Jesus Christ and His salvation known to the whole world?

God never asks His people for anything He has not first provided to us. He has blessed us as individuals with the gifts that we use together in His Church. We have the opportunity within our own circle of friends and family to bring light to those around us. But God thinks bigger. He calls us together as congregations, that we may use the gifts He has given to us as individuals to build up one another. As a congregation we work to reach out to the community around us. Perhaps we even send a missionary to another place. But how can one person—or one congregation, for that matter, ever hope to bring the light of God's truth to the whole world?

This is why our congregations come together in Lutheran Church—Canada. Walking together, we are able to do more than we can alone. Working together, we are able to support mission work in our districts and throughout the world. Sharing together, we are able to think big. It is too small a thing to confine our efforts to London, Winnipeg, or the Pas. It is too small a thing to focus only on Canada. By the grace of God, empowered by His Spirit, we can think big. We can be His light to the nations, and bring His salvation to the ends of the earth.

An essential component of this big thinking is our system of higher education. Through our university college and seminaries the church works together to train and equip strong servants. We help these servants to grow in the Word so that they, like sharp swords and polished arrows can go forth to share that Word of life and light. As these servants go out as pastors, teachers, missionaries, Directors of Parish Services, Directors of Outreach, or whatever other offices God leads His people to fulfil, they preach, teach, evangelize, and equip God's people for service, helping God's people to think big. As they serve the Lord and His church, these servants, strong in the Lord and equipped through the Spirit and through the discipline and training of our institutions of higher education help prepare other strong servants in God's church: servants who bring the Light of life to all people.

But what good are our schools if they are empty? What advantage is there in our various programs if there are no students studying in them? As our church continues its RSVP efforts, we recognize the need for the workers in the church—those who will study and learn, and go forth in the name of the Lord to work and serve where and when He will call them. We need those strong servants who will bring light to those in darkness as they proclaim Christ crucified and risen again. Jesus teaches us to start with prayer, asking the Lord of the Harvest to provide

the workers. But He may well answer that prayer through the encouragement we give to the men and women we see as having gifts to serve. Do you remember Andrew? After he had spent time with Jesus we are told that the first thing he did was go and invite his brother to come and see the Messiah. Led by his brother, Simon did come—and as He learned the truth of Jesus and from Jesus, he was honed by the Lord into the strong and faithful servant we now call St. Peter.

We have the schools to prepare strong servants. We have a world in need of their ministry. We even have the future pastors and workers the Lord has set apart for His service. We just haven't identified them all yet. We haven't trained them yet. But by the grace of God we will identify them, prepare them, and send them forth in His name to accomplish His purpose. Paul reminds us that ***God, who has called you into fellowship with His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.*** He will bless our seminaries, our university college, our schools in general, as they work to prepare servants for His church. He will raise up workers. And He will grant success to His church; the Church which thinks big and which goes forth in His name and in His stead to bring His salvation in Jesus Christ to the very ends of the earth.

Amen.