

Becoming the Good News Voice

Isaiah 42:1-9

Acts 10: 34-43

There is a voice you may have adopted for speaking with your children. There is a voice you've probably adopted when speaking with your spouse. There are voices that you may remember hearing as children, the voice of a mother calling you home, the voice of a childhood friend, the voice of a father who really has had enough of your nonsense, or a teacher telling you that you simply need to "apply yourself" – I heard that one a lot. There is a preacher's voice just like there's a teacher's voice. The white preacher's voice sounds one way and a black preacher's voice is going to sound different. All these different voices are familiar in their own particular way to our personal experience.

Our scriptures are attuned to the voice because there is a voice that God wants us to adopt as well as recognize. It's the good news voice. If you've heard it – and I'm betting you have at some point in your life – then it held a spiritual power that was enlivening and maybe even exhilarating. It's the voice that bears God's message for God's people, and it's a voice that we should not simply seek out in others, but seek to emulate in our own faithful walk.

We come again to Second Isaiah and his portrayal of "the servant," the Chosen One of God who serves to advance God's will and God's kingdom promise. The servant is introduced to us: *Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.*

Again, we don't know exactly how to identify "the servant" noted several times in Second Isaiah, but it seems like the author has a specific individual in mind. We hear the voice of God not only presenting the servant, but declaring that God's own Spirit is upon him. Then, the servant's mission is articulated: *to bring justice to the nations.*

We may not be too sure what exactly this "justice" consists of, but surely it's a big mission. Surely there will be opposition because the forces of injustice tend to be very highly motivated, using unjust systems for their own benefit. The servant will need to be a commanding leader, right? However, that isn't the impression we get from Second Isaiah as the description of the servant continues.

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. In faithfulness, he will bring forth justice; he will not grow faint or be discouraged until he has established justice on earth. In his teaching, the coastlands will put their hope.

Here we have the voice of the servant depicted, and it isn't what we call a leader's voice. Having known many career military officers, almost every one of them has a commanding voice. It commands respect and has a powerful intonation. Not the voice of this servant of God. This won't be the loud voice of passion or power, but the measured voice of a teacher. This measured voice is also a reflection of how the servant approaches

God's mission. A certain care gets shown for the "bruised reed" and there would appear to be delicate nurturing of the "smoldering wick," both so easy to disregard and trample and extinguish. Instead, the servant will minister to them both, to bring healing to the reed and sustain the last spark of the wick. The world may have disregarded such brokenness, but the servant will minister to those whom the world would disdain for their blemishes and their weakness.

It would seem that the servant's message will be their power, a message inspired by the Holy Spirit upon them. *In faithfulness, he will bring forth justice.* Faithfulness will be the key strength of the servant, a faithfulness that neither "falters" nor gets "discouraged" by the difficulties and the slow pace of advancing God's desire for justice.

God goes on to describe the characteristics of divinity, the Creator and Sustainer who "gives breath" and "life." God has called forth this servant, will "take hold of your hand," and will make you – the servant – "to be a covenant for the people **and** a light for the Gentiles." The mission of the servant encompasses not only God's people of the covenant – the Jews – but also reaches out to the Gentiles, at least as an integral part of the mission if not exactly part of the covenant with the Jews.

You can see why Christian apologists look to the servant texts in Second Isaiah and see imagery of Jesus. But again, that would take away from Second Isaiah's message which definitely was not about Jesus *per se*, but about this servant of God.

Finally, we find out what this "justice" consists of: *to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.* We would miss the poetic imagery if we took this literally. The blind and the imprisoned are not the specific subjects of the mission. Rather, the metaphor of the blind as those who cannot see their way, cannot see their way forward, cannot see their God, cannot see hope, and cannot see the new life promise of their God. Similarly, the imprisoned are trapped in their despair, their weakness, their brokenness, and their darkness. The servant is to be the light and liberation for all those who lack vision and hope.

The servant has what I would call a good news voice. Not Jesus perhaps, but like Jesus, the servant comes to bring good news to those who are desperate and suffering. While certainly this servant is specially called by God, the prophet gives witness to the good news of justice, the good news of hope and new life. In that witness, there is an implicit message that those who would see themselves as the servants of God need to bear witness themselves with a good news voice. It is not simply the mission of one servant, but the calling to every faithful servant.

This Sunday is the first Sunday in Epiphany, and it recognizes the baptism of Jesus. I opted for an alternate text from Acts 10 since it contains a speech from Peter that summarizes the Jesus movement and its activity in sharing the good news gospel of Jesus up that point. From Peter, we hear the voice of a tradition that is still in its early stages. Here, Peter seems to be addressing a mixed crowd of Jews and Gentiles. They've come together as both Roman centurion Cornelius, a Gentile, and the apostle Peter have both had visions concerning the other and their coming together.

This episode stands as one of several defining moments from the earliest church as they struggled with what to do about Gentiles in their ostensibly Jewish reform movement. Peter has come to the realization here that “God does not show favoritism (or partiality) but accepts people from everywhere who fear God and do what is right.” God is establishing a covenant relationship with anyone who seeks God in faithfulness and acts for justice and righteousness.

Peter characterizes Jesus’ message as “the good news of peace.” This “good news of peace” is not simply the absence of violence. Rather it is the more expansive notion of *shalom*, encompassing health and wholeness and well-being and spirituality and equity and justice and more.

From this, Peter recalls John the Baptist and Jesus receiving the Holy Spirit *and power*. Jesus’ ministry is described as “doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.” Here, doing good and doing what is right are virtually synonymous, referring to doing the work of God’s mission, just as the servant in Second Isaiah.

The healing ministry is not simply ailments, but more broadly those who were “under the power of the devil.” In the work of striving for justice, those who are wed to systems of injustice would be included among those who are “under the power of the devil.” Jesus’ ministry was all about exercising the good news voice.

Peter narrates the history of the end of his ministry and the beginning of the church’s ministry as Christ’s body alive and active in service to our Lord’s Kingdom. The crucifixion, resurrection, and resurrection appearances are all recounted.

Finally, Peter identifies Jesus’ instructions to them: *He commanded us to preach to the people and to give witness that he is the one appointed as judge of the living and the dead*. There it is again, the good news voice. It is the one who teaches about light and liberation, justice and peace, healing and bringing new life. And he means not only vocalizing it, but giving witness, working to fulfill the good news in peoples’ lives.

In all, we’re called to become the good news voice, the one that announces the promise of God and new life in the Lord, but also the one who works in mission to bring God’s blessing to those who suffer.

Too often in our society, we’re blind to real needs and manage to get distracted by phony ruses. People lose hope. People suffer. People die. The faithful servant is called to the way of the Lord, the ministry of hope and new life. The bruised reeds and smoldering wicks, the people kept out and left out and dropped out are longing for the good news voice to come to ears that more commonly receive disdain, disgust, and dismay.

The good news voice is for healing and hope, for justice on God’s terms. It is not simply spoken word but also in a living, active witness. That’s the servant’s task,

patiently and compassionately, but also relentlessly in faithfulness, taking the word of our Lord and giving it body, form, and loving power today. As we share at the Lord's table, may we connect with him, his spirit, and his ministry, finding our center in demanding justice, healing brokenness, and incarnating the new life promise of the good news of Jesus, our Lord and Savior.