

Greater Than You Imagine

Isaiah 49: 1-7

John 1: 29-42

Bruce Lee is someone many may remember. He was well-known for his martial art skills. He first emerged on the scene in the 60s TV show "The Green Hornet." The lead actor playing The Green Hornet was Van Williams and his sidekick was Kato played by Bruce Lee. There were only 26 episodes in one season before the show was cancelled, but it quickly became obvious that Kato's martial arts moves generated the show's viewers. Bruce Lee had introduced American viewers to Asian martial arts, and we were fascinated and amazed.

Bruce Lee performed his moves so fast that producers had to ask him to slow down his action sequences so that it could be seen. Someone would be standing, and then in a flash, the person would be flat on the ground, as if it had been a trick of video editing. Lead actor Van Williams understood that the Kato character was what people wanted to see and advocated for greater visibility for Kato, for Lee, to showcase his skills. But the studio execs didn't want an Asian lead actor, disbelieving that audiences would tune in to watch an Asian talent, and resisted.

Although the show ended quickly, Bruce Lee had made a name for himself. The Green Hornet would go on to play in Hong Kong where it was aptly marketed as "The Kato Show."

But Bruce Lee was more than a champion martial artist and more than screen actor. His embrace of martial arts included its philosophical aspects, too, reflective of Taoism and Buddhism. He was a poet and writer as well.

He didn't simply want to perform martial art routines in his movies; he wanted to convey philosophical wisdom as well. He was working with Warner Brothers in 1973 on "Enter the Dragon" and famously got in a dispute with them. They wanted a flashy action picture, but Bruce Lee wanted to insert his brand of philosophical wisdom. Warner Brothers refused which led Lee to refuse to continue until they relented. It took several weeks as Lee put his career in jeopardy, but they finally gave in.

He died before the movie was finished, likely from a reaction to medication that brought on a cerebral edema. He was only 32. But that movie, "Enter the Dragon," remains a classic to this day.

We should be ready to discover something greater than we imagine in other people, places, and events, but we are often surprised when such things get revealed.

God is the master of such surprises as we find in one of the servant passages in Second Isaiah.

The servant of the Lord in Isaiah is someone who knew he had been called to serve from the womb. He had been given every good gift; a mouth like a sharpened

sword, like a polished arrow saved in the quiver. But despite his good gifts and his good intentions and his good service, he himself couldn't see where he had made any difference. For all of his skills and commitment, he couldn't point to any success. Yet here in our passage, God is saying to him, *You are my servant ... in whom I will display my splendor*. The guy has to be looking around to see if there is someone else that God could possibly be addressing. Surely it isn't him; his efforts had all been in vain and pointless for all he could see.

The servant replies to God, *I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing*. He sounds pretty hopeless. He is trying to set the record straight because perhaps God has missed his stunning lack of achievement. Has God confused him with someone else, perhaps?

Still, the servant makes his profession of faith. *Yet what is due me is in the Lord's hand, and my reward is with my God*. He affirms his commitment to serve the Lord his God, knowing that **his life gains meaning and purpose** in his service, regardless of the results. He admits that he is *honored in the sight of the Lord and my God has been my strength*. He would have it no other way, again regardless of the results.

Shockingly, God replies: *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*.

So, not only is the servant's dedicated service greatly appreciated and highly regarded, the servant gets – despite his self-conception and despite his lack of progress – a new and even greater mission. The servant must wonder if this is a new invitation to ongoing **failure**. While he will serve his God with the utmost energy and devoted faithfulness, is he being called to yet another fool's errand?

God continues, aware of his servant's misgivings, responding to this doubtful history, admitting that the servant, who has been despised and abhorred, will bring kings to their feet and cause princes to bow down. The servant's faithfulness will be met by God's faithfulness, for this servant is God's chosen. He is selected precisely for his faithful service to his God, not counting the results, but standing firm in his trust and faith in God. This servant has shown an abiding faithfulness in *every* season, and he can be counted on to carry forward God's word and mission. If someone can make a difference in advancing God's mission, **this** is the guy.

Some will get to see their efforts succeed and they earn a measure of our trust and respect. Others will never ring true to us no matter what they do. (I'm talking to you, TV evangelists.) Above all, experience seems to be the great teacher. In the case of the servant in Isaiah, the experience of this servant impressed God and encouraged God to expand the size and scope of the servant's mission. But what can we say about *experience* when we read about the early encounters of disciples with Jesus?

Returning to John's gospel, we're at the point of Jesus being with John the Baptist, and John is depicted as generously lavishing praise on Jesus every time he sees

him. Frankly, the gushing is a bit excessive. The writer's effort to set Jesus as special and unique apart from John is poured on a bit too thick here. John's gospel account has John the Baptist falling over himself to defer to Jesus as the Messiah, the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world, the one on whom the Spirit of God came to rest and remained, the Son of God. Okay, okay! Jesus is the One! We get it already.

The story goes on to describe two of John's disciples hearing John exclaiming about Jesus and choosing to follow Jesus ... literally, as in walking behind him. Jesus senses his adopted shadows and turns on them asking, "What do you want?" It's an interesting question. Not *whom do you seek?* Not *do you believe your teacher, John?* Not *what are doing following me? You're creepy.* His question (what do you **want?**) didn't get an answer. Maybe the disciples were a bit stunned and flustered by this. They ask him in reply, *Where are you staying?* Okay, for me, now that's really creepy.

They followed along and spent the rest of the day with Jesus. They wanted to see if Jesus was the real thing as John had said. Yes, their teacher John was highly respected, a prophet and servant of God, but John was a bit out-there on the wild side. Consumed with questions and seeking signs of validation, they came away convinced from their time with Jesus. They believed.

Andrew, one of the two who had followed Jesus, immediately went off to tell his brother Simon, *we have found the Messiah*, and brought Simon to Jesus. Jesus names him Cephas, or more familiarly Rocky.

We see disciples beginning to gather around Jesus, even before he leaves the Baptizing community. (Truth be told, he's stealing John's disciples. Well, never mind that.) The curious disciples of John found in the person Jesus a unique level of wisdom, insight, and perspective, a rare depth of sacred understanding and spirituality. They came away convinced that, indeed, this was the one whom God had sent. Further, this was the One whom they would follow. It was a major life commitment on the part of the disciples, defined and expanded based on this encounter with the one who promised that his mission would change the world for the Kingdom of God. When the time came, they would depart from the Baptizing community and follow Jesus. They saw his faith in God and they had faith in him. Their lives wouldn't be the same.

In these cases, the outcome was greater than expected or even imagined. Faithfulness is once again front and center, yielding profound outcomes for the individuals involved. For the servant in Isaiah and the disciples following Jesus, their faith commitments lead them into God's unique promise for them, into their calling and mission to serve the Kingdom.

This should remind us that God has blessed each part of creation with blessings, not obviously in some instances. For fire ants and mosquitos and love bugs, God's blessings are difficult for us to perceive. It can seem as impenetrable when we are thinking of people, too. A body covered in tatoos, the vacant stare of someone abusing drugs, the anxious manner of someone poor and seeking assistance, the dirty, ill-fitting clothes of the homeless, or the blue prison garb of an inmate are a few examples when

we might have difficulty recognizing that God has given personal gifts and blessings to each one of them, perhaps awaiting release into new life. What is there is greater than we imagine, and indeed beyond visual perception. Faith provides a different lens for seeing, shaping the contours differently so that the perspective of God and Kingdom generate a vision of worth and value when our eyes may prefer to look away. Can we see with such vision? And then can we endeavor to release the blessings that God has provided?

The other angle to this concerns ourselves. We don't think of ourselves as having blessings that are masked in such terms. True enough, but the masks that submerge our blessings are simply different. In our maturity, we wear the garments of the past, of what we have already done, of the point in life where we are now. As there is more past behind us than new life ahead of us, we doubt that there is room for more than what we imagine.

I read a piece last week about a woman who was born into slavery in 1848, who had never learned how to read. In 1974, at the age of 116, she decided she would learn how to read. It likely came in handy since she lived to be 121. The promise of God is greater than you imagine and the blessings to be released are also beyond our scope of comprehension.

In Epiphany, we come to see Jesus, realizing that here indeed is one who greater than people imagine, and remains greater than we imagine. He calls us into *his* ministry, not into our own likely easier designs. Jesus calls his faithful to serve, to sacrifice, and to save in bringing new life. He invites on a journey of feeding, healing, freeing, teaching, bringing justice and incarnating hope, bringing light to turn back the darkness. It's big stuff, even for a little people like us. Following Jesus, it's always greater than you imagine.