

Faith's Fulfillment

Isaiah 50: 4-9a Matthew 21: 1-11

As the saying goes, the talk is a lot easier than the walk. That's particularly true for matters of faith. We talk a great game, but the road reveals few footfalls.

The great British Baptist preacher of the 19th century, Charles Spurgeon, said: "A man's **life** is always more forcible than his **speech**. When men take stock of him they reckon his **deeds as dollars** and his **words as pennies**. If his life and doctrine disagree, the mass of onlookers accept his practice and reject his preaching."

I liked that: *his deeds as dollars and his words as pennies*. It seems like God and the prophets and Jesus are regularly telling us this message, that words are cheap and deeds are costly. People of faith seem to screw that up mightily. As I've said before, more often we ignore this summons to action. We elevate the worship ritual to high priority and count church attendance as the action that attests to our faithfulness. Widely attributed to St. Francis of Assisi is the quote, "Preach the gospel always, and use words if necessary," although there is no written record of Francis ever using the phrase. Nonetheless, there are plenty of similar, wordier quotes of his.

The Reformation theologians didn't help any since they were adamantly opposed to valuing works lest the deeds of God's people become esteemed for the purpose of their salvation, as if people can earn their salvation as opposed to being dependent on the grace of God. That was certainly a correct theological understanding, but it provided a path that devalued a person's deeds and activities as having sacred importance.

Danish Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard told this parable about geese, paraphrasing some of it. Every seventh day, the geese would parade to a corner of the yard where their most eloquent orator sat upon the fence and spoke about the wonders of being a goose. He told them the great things their forefathers had done. He described the flight of their noteworthy predecessors. He spoke of the mercy of the Creator who had given geese wings and the instinct to fly. "And every week the geese were uplifted, inspired, moved by the philosopher's message. They hung on his every word. They devoted hours, weeks, months to a thoroughgoing analysis and critical evaluation of his doctrines. They produced learned treatises on the ethical and spiritual implications of flight. All this they did. But one thing they never did. They did not fly! For the corn was good, and the barnyard was secure!"

People of faith are called to engage those situations where faith actually matters. It takes no worthy act of faith to come to church on Sunday. That's simply a matter of will, or of desire for community with friends, or a longing to have a spiritual hunger fed. Faith is experienced when the encounter takes you away from the comfortable and routine, separates you from the customary and the secure, and thrusts you into the unexpected and uncertain, into discomfort and distress, even danger. Unless we add one more piece, it would describe my level of faith to encounter a roller coaster at an amusement park. When this encounter brings you into direct experience with God's

priority people, the weak, poor, outcast, despised, and oppressed, then we recognize the faith of which God, God's prophets, and Jesus spoke. That's faith in sacred action, participating in ministries of healing, reconciliation, hope, and new life.

We return this morning to another of the "suffering servant" passages in Second Isaiah. Again, we have an unnamed servant of God, perhaps the prophet himself, but just as likely a representative type rather than a specific individual.

Regardless, we understand that this servant has been called and gifted by God for a mission. The servant's obedience to God is described as a teacher, as a listener to God's word, as being available to serve God faithfully. When we understand "faithfully" here, it doesn't mean that he goes to worship in the sanctuary on every Sabbath, or offers the proper sacrifices. We find out that he is called to trust in God and stand tall in the face of uncertainty, distress, and even assault.

I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting. Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore I have set my face like flint.

The servant of the Lord has clearly been captured, held as prisoner, and is being despised, afflicted, and tormented by his captors.

It is easy to speculate that the servant of the Lord has been arrested. The servant of the Lord has done what God required, done what God expected, and done it so well that he got noticed by the pretender powers, the worldly powers, the temporary, temporal powers who like to consider themselves sovereign over all, defiant of the One who truly is the Sovereign Lord and who wants things changed. That can get you arrested, even today.

Who will judge this servant of God? Likely a respected individual, appointed by the lord of the land, by the king, or maybe is even the king himself acting in judgment. The servant of the Lord can recite the charges against him, and can easily predict the guilty charge that will be leveled against him, and that the punishment will be harsh, designed to teach a lesson and communicate a message to any other possible troublemakers. He doesn't need to go through some phony hearing full of legalese and pompous ceremony, all contrived to make the court appearance seem just and worthy and true when it's really all a sham. That's one of the reasons that the servant of the Lord ended up in this predicament, his penchant for denouncing the injustices and those who justify them, exposing the shams, the schemes, and the pretenders who profess their faith and screw over their neighbor, even with a veneer of sacred obligation. How contemptibly corrupt!

The servant of the Lord knows the outcome of the trial long before it ever begins, but here is the prosecutor and the judge, imagining themselves rendering final judgment. 'How comical,' reflects the servant of the Lord. The servant says: *I know I will not be put to shame. He who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges*

*against me? Who is my accuser? Let him confront me! It is **the Sovereign Lord** who helps me. Who is he that will condemn me?*

The outcome of the trial isn't what the servant of the Lord regards. The servant of the Lord could care less what the sham charges are, what the sham verdict is, or anything else that this court of pretenders wants to produce. The true justice comes from God, and God is the One who shaped him and formed him and whose words he has heard and spoken. *He who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges against me? ... The Sovereign Lord helps me. Who is he that will condemn me?*

The faithfulness of the servant of the Lord gets a second witness in the passage with Matthew's account of Jesus' entry to Jerusalem. It begins with Jesus' final approach into the city. Stopping, he sends two disciples ahead to get a donkey and a colt. The reason for borrowing them will quickly become the talk of the town. People come out of the city to see this prophet who has sent the ancient signal. That's what the donkey and colt are; the ancient signal. It would be like riding into Washington on a horse, wrapped in Old Glory, holding aloft a torch like the Statue of Liberty and crying out like Paul Revere, while an eagle flies overhead with bombs bursting in air. That's a pretty clear signal, right? The one who rides a donkey up the road into Jerusalem sends a signal just as clear.

The one riding the donkey is the one who comes to fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah, the prophecy of the Messiah who comes to liberate God's people and bring justice, peace and freedom to God's people. To many of those around Jerusalem, the promise and the hope is that the Messiah will vanquish the occupying Roman army and restore the monarchy, bring relief from Roman taxation and oppression, make the city sacred and free of the sinful corruptions of Roman influence, and bring to fulfillment God's promise that this people should be free and their faithfulness upheld. So, the donkey and the colt provide clear notice to the city that the Messiah has come.

The crowd waved branches and cloaks and hands (palms only appear in John's gospel). The crowd's cheers of "Hosanna to the Son of David" make the perception clear; this is the messiah, the Son of David whom God has sent for his people.

Jesus' entry to Jerusalem is certainly noticed by the powers, Jewish and Roman. This raucous fanfare for a messiah is **not welcome**. On one hand, the Romans have a solid reputation for dealing swiftly and severely with any who would challenge their authority. On the other hand, Jewish leaders have to play ball with the Romans, knowing that their well-being relies on their Roman benefactors. A revolutionary who causes trouble for the Romans causes trouble for them. This move by this wandering preacher Jesus is a threat to them if they cannot control and contain him.

The powers have seen messiahs come and go. Some messiahs generate rebellions and others are simply best ignored, and if they're too problematic, they're dead meat. With the enthusiasm of the crowds, no one makes a move now. It may precipitate a reaction that causes even more trouble. No, for now, they would let the people settle down and learn more about what this messiah is all about and what resources he has.

How popular is he, or is this excitement only temporary? What is his agenda, and how does he plan to act on it? Wait and see is a smart strategy ... for now.

They will learn that this messiah doesn't have an obvious political ambition, a passion to rid the holy city of the Roman stain of paganism. This messiah isn't talking about restoring the throne of David. They find his agenda both quaint and personally threatening. He preaches about repentance and faithfulness to God. He defies *their* accepted teachings and interpretation of the Torah-Law of God. He offers his own interpretations in their place. He claims to have the authority of God, but all messiahs claim that to some degree, don't they?

But the religious leaders definitely see that *they* are targets of his mission. He also challenges scribal and priestly authority. If large numbers of the people no longer heed the religious leadership, wouldn't Rome intervene to keep the peace? They decide to deal with Jesus and fend off his threat to their power and standing.

The people's disappointment will rise as hope and promise ebb with time and fulfillment is denied. By Friday, they'll have no use for this faithful servant of God, Jesus.

Jesus would turn out to be **less** than what the people *wanted*, but actually he was **more** than what the people *expected*.

The one from God would be hailed on his entry, but scorned and ridiculed by Good Friday. Defeated in life, his faithfulness unto death would make his ministry triumphant – faith's fulfillment.

In both servants of God – the suffering servant imprisoned in Isaiah, and Jesus coming directly into confrontation with the powers of Jerusalem – faith meant stepping *into* difficulties, not stepping *aside* to avoid them. Faith meant making the journey into uncertainty and knowing that success was very unlikely. Yes, even God's purpose may seem obscured. Faith means trusting that the God who calls each servant is the God who established his promise in you.

The servant of the Lord is invited on this Sunday to follow the faithful steps of Jesus and follow the faithful path of Isaiah's servant. When you're in that place where God alone is all that seems certain, then you know that a servant faith has brought you to that place. God's promise in you will be fulfilled.