Second Sunday after Epiphany – January 19, 2020

Isaiah 49:1–7
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 splendor." 4 But
I said, "I have labored 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 honored 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." 7 This is what the LORD says—the Redeemer and Holy One
of Israel—to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation, to the servant of rulers: "Kings
will see you and rise up, princes will see and bow down, because of the LORD, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" It's a question that children are often asked and can have a wide variety of answers. The younger they are the more likely they are to answer with their favorite cartoon characters whether animals or princesses or superheroes. That may eventually shift to a sports athlete or movie star. Children may also answer with the jobs that their parents or grandparents have or other adult that they know. And while those answers will change many times over the years, sometimes even daily, there is one answer that does not often come up—"I want to be a servant." Part of this is because servants are a profession that we rarely see in our society anymore. Our only exposure to it is something like the Downton Abbey TV series which portrayed life from a century ago. The other part of this is that being a servant is not a job that brings much glory and honor and power to one's life.

In our continued look at the book of Isaiah, we have another text that describes the servant of the Lord, the second of four such sections. The season of Epiphany is always about how our Savior reveals himself to us and the world and so this morning/evening we will focus on that servant aspect. To help us to see how **The Lord's Servant is Revealed** we will focus first on **his nature** and second on **his purpose**.

By the time of Isaiah's recording of prophecy, the promise of a Savior had been made for thousands of years. But it would still be another seven hundred years before Jesus' birth in Bethlehem and so it would be hard for Isaiah's audience to see all the details. For us after the fact, we can find the clues in these verses that reveal the Lord's servant.

Verse 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." Even when the Savior would come it would not be obvious. He would be hidden and concealed. Jesus was not born to royalty or people of high position so that everyone knew about him, but to a lowly carpenter and his wife from Nazareth. Even in his ministry he kept a low profile. There were glimpses of glory at times—his baptism that we heard about last week, his transfiguration which we will

celebrate at the end of Epiphany, and his miracles. But if the crowds got too large or wanted to call attention to him, Jesus would leave to defuse the situation.

Related to this hiddenness is the first half of verse 4: "But I said, 'I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing.'" Jesus was a human being—true God became true man. From a human perspective his ministry would seem at times to be in vain and for nothing. He was the long-promised Savior and still his people would reject him and his message. That rejection would finally result in his arrest and execution. But from a heavenly perspective this would not be in vain or for nothing. The rest of verse 4: "Yet what is due me is in the LORD's hand, and my reward is with my God." And later in verse 5: "I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength." It was precisely because of his rejection and death that he would complete the work that he came to do.

Jesus came as a humble servant of the Lord. But we are servants of the Servant and so we can make some connections to ourselves. Do you ever feel like being God's servant means your glory is hidden? Our lives are not perfect—we still struggle with sin and its temptations, we endure grieving and sadness, we face sickness and pain. Do you ever feel like you have spent your strength in vain or for nothing? A family member leaves the church. Someone we've trying to invite to church says no. We are made fun of for the biblical beliefs that we hold onto in our lives. Life can seem at times like we are losing ground, rather than making progress.

As the Lord's servants we remember that we cannot expect anything better or different than what Jesus faced in this world. In our gospel lesson we heard how John the Baptist pointed to Jesus as the Lamb of God. He was not called the lion or eagle or some other powerful or noble creature, but a little helpless lamb. A lamb marked for sacrifice. Jesus was not here for glory and he was rejected. So too our lives more often than not will be anything but glorious as we face the rejection of a sinful world. But such rejection cannot take away the service of the Lord's servant, the purpose for which he came to serve.

We see that purpose also in verse 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." The sword of the Servant's mouth is the living and active Word of God, as the writer to the Hebrews describes, "sharper than any double-edged sword" (Heb 4:12). Jesus would not come to lead armies into physical battle. He would be a prophet himself and preach the word, a tool to be used in a spiritual battle with the devil and his followers.

Verse 3: "He said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor.'" Jesus did not come to bring glory to the nation of Israel—something that many Jews were looking for in their Messiah. He came to bring glory to God by completing the plan that had been set in motion when Adam and Eve fell into sin. We see that plan in verse 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.'" The Servant's purpose was salvation—bringing rescue from the power of sin, death and the devil. This salvation would be accomplished by the Lamb of God—sacrificed on the cross to pay for sin. This salvation was not just for the physical descendants of Abraham who had been part of God's chosen people for two thousand years. It was also for the Gentiles—every other nation on earth. Jesus' life and death on this earth were all about winning salvation for all people of all time.

As servants of the Servant, what is our purpose? Is God's Word a sharpened sword that we use as a tool for our lives? Or has it become hidden and forgotten through our lack of use or our indifference? Do we display God's glory and splendor in our lives? Or do we live our lives for our own glory and prefer the things we want to do? Is our focus on bringing salvation to others or are we content with the status quo and where we're at in our lives?

As servants of the Servant, our follow through will not always be perfect. Even our best of intentions will be misdirected by our sinful nature. But the Servant of the Lord is also the Lamb of God who died to pay for all of our sins, all of the times we have failed as his servants. And so we will daily repent of our sins and daily recalibrate our purpose to live before God. We will study his Word to strengthen ourselves and train ourselves to better handle and use it. We will display his glory to show our thanks and so that others can learn about him as we tell them the good news of salvation for all, Gentiles included. This will be our purpose at every stage of life, no matter who we are or where we are or who we're with or what we're doing.

Verses 7 closes our text: "This is what the LORD says—the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel—to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation, to the servant of rulers: 'Kings will see you and rise up, princes will see and bow down, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.'" While children or even adults may never have servant as their first choice of career opportunities, our Triune God chose the role of servant for us. He was despised and abhorred, with glory hidden to take on his role as the Lamb of God. His purpose was our salvation, to sacrifice himself for our sins so that someday we can spend our eternity with him in heaven. There we will see the Lamb not as Servant but as King and join the angels' song: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" (Rev 5:12). Amen.