

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, January 15, 2017)

Text: Isaiah 49:1-7 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Islands, listen to me!

Pay attention, distant peoples!

Yahweh called me before I was born, and named me from my mother's womb. God made my mouth a sharp sword, and hid me in the shadow of the hand of the Most High.

The Almighty made me into a sharpened arrow, and concealed me in God's quiver. The Holy One said to me, "You are my Servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

I had been thinking, "I have toiled in vain, I have exhausted myself for nothing!"—yet all the while my cause was with Yahweh, and my reward was with my God.

Thus says Yahweh, who formed me in the womb to be God's Servant, who destined me to bring back the children of Jacob and gather again the people of Israel; "It is not enough for you to do my bidding, to restore the tribes of Leah, Rachel, and Jacob and bring back the survivors of Israel; I will make you the light of the nations, so that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

Thus say Yahweh, the Redeemer of Israel, the Holy One, to the one deeply despised, the one abhorred by nations, the one enslaved by despots: "Rulers will stand when you walk in the room and court officials will pay homage because of Yahweh, who is faithful, because of the Holy One of Israel, who chose you."

Psalms 40:1-11 (We sang this passage from *The New Century Hymnal's Psalter*. Here is the text from the New Revised Standard Version of the scriptures:

I waited patiently for the LORD;

he inclined to me and heard my cry.

He drew me up from the desolate pit,

out of the miry bog,

and set my feet upon a rock,

making my steps secure.

He put a new song in my mouth,

a song of praise to our God.

Many will see and fear,

and put their trust in the LORD.

Happy are those who make

the LORD their trust,

who do not turn to the proud,

to those who go astray after false gods.

You have multiplied, O LORD my God,

your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us;

none can compare with you.

Were I to proclaim and tell of them,
they would be more than can be counted.
Sacrifice and offering you do not desire,
but you have given me an open ear.
Burnt offering and sin offering
you have not required.
Then I said, "Here I am;
in the scroll of the book it is written of me.
I delight to do your will, O my God;
your law is within my heart."
I have told the glad news of deliverance
in the great congregation;
see, I have not restrained my lips,
as you know, O LORD.
I have not hidden your saving help within my heart,
I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation;
I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness
from the great congregation.
Do not, O LORD, withhold
your mercy from me;
let your steadfast love and your faithfulness
keep me safe forever.

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **"Listen, God is Calling!"**

As I return to you after a much needed study break, (thank God (literally) that Christmas and New Year's only fall on Sundays every 7 years!), I come to you with thanksgiving for all the sharing and caring and giving you did over the holidays! The phenomenal gifts we were able to give as a church to The Christmas Fund and many other mission oriented entities never failed to amaze me, as did your commitment to this church with your pledges which have allowed us to put together not only a prosperous budget but one with vision and commitment to God's work in this world.

As I considered our texts for today as well as the many ways in which YOU work at your own individual callings, including all you wonderful teachers out there, I came across a little story I thought you might enjoy...

You see a man named Ole went to the pet store and told the owner that he wanted to buy an unusual pet. After some discussion, he finally bought a talking centipede, which came in a little white box that served as his abode. So Ole took the box back home, found a good location for it, and decided he would start off by taking his new pet to church with him. (What a great idea!)

So he asked the centipede in the box, "Would you like to go to church with me today? We will have a good time." But there was no answer from his new pet. This bothered him a bit, but he waited a few minutes and then asked him again, "How about going to church with me and receiving blessings?" But again, there was no answer from his new friend and pet. So he waited a few minutes

more, thinking about the situation. He decided to ask the bug once again; this time putting his face up against the centipede's house and shouting, "Hey, in there! Would you like to go to church with me and learn about the Lord?" Finally, a small voice came out of the box: "I heard you the first time; I'm putting on my shoes."

You see, each of us have our gifts, and for some of us it just takes a little longer to get out the door because we have so much we have to do to get ready to serve!

Our passage from Isaiah today, read so well for us by Miss Janet, was written by a person scholars tell us we can only know as "the unknown servant." Now, I doubt that he was a centipede servant, but what we find in our passage struck me as profoundly true for each of us in some way today, no matter how many pairs of shoes we have to put on.

You see, I believe that God calls to and empowers each one of us, and I'm not talking about just clergy or other leaders in the church here, but the belief that God calls to each one of us, even before we were born(!) to live into our calling as children of the most high - To proclaim a word of hope in the midst of hopelessness; to care for one another and to do the work of our Creator to proclaim and bring about God's salvation.

I believe that God is continually speaking hope in the midst of hopelessness; caring for each one of us and forever offering salvation to anyone who will but listen and heed God's call.

Writing on the UCC's Samuel page as she considered this text, Karen Georgia Thompson muses that, "God's plan requires our willingness to be participants in the world around us. [And that] God's plan requires that we give all that we are to make a difference in the world around us."

I'm sure our preschool teachers and others who have served as teachers, that would be many of you in this congregation, have experienced the tremendous reward of making a difference in your students' lives and, perhaps, even having the gift of seeing them go on to make a difference in the world around them.

But many of us are often frightened to accept this Call offered by God, aren't we? I know I am! I mean, there's just a little too much going on right now, you know. As we enter this new year, I am more than a little aware of all the craziness that surrounds us in this world, and of all the things that could possibly happen and keep me from making any difference. Just like the unknown servant writing in Isaiah, it is tempting to think that all of our work here has been in vain.

As we listened to the news this week and considered all that was to come as reporters and journalists and our president-elect battled it out over what was real news and what was fake, I felt my own fear rising to the surface as I wondered what there was to hang on to anymore and where the truth really lies. Of course, as a Christian, we always know where the truth lies and that is certainly something to hold on to in these very uncertain times.

How, I wonder, though, can we listen for God's call when there is so much noise abounding? How do we heed God's call when our own health is threatened or a loved one falls ill or dies? As I had the great privilege of visiting with my parents when they were out here for a couple weeks in December, my awareness increased of the fragility of this human life as I witness them aging, and the tenuousness of my own lifeline connected to them and to my past and even to who I have become.

And yet I know that the cycle of life is going to bring about an ending as surely as it brought about a beginning. God's call to be faithful in the midst of our fears is one of the most difficult things we experience as humans. And our tendency to think that the work we do with God means nothing can often lead us to giving up and giving in. Instead of responding with, "here I am, Lord, send me", we're often going to be found hiding in a corner and hoping that somebody else responds first.

But of what use is this hiding, truly? As the servant says in our text, "Yahweh called me before I was born, and named me from my mother's womb." It's a scary prospect this being known by God

before we wake up, before we lie down, before we're even born, isn't it? Do I really want my every thought known? By God or anyone else? I think not!

And then I hear the words of the Bard, "Lord, what fools these mortals be!" Where do we think we will hide where we can escape God's call? Why do we even bother trying to run or make excuses? Isn't it far better to just stop and to listen? What would happen if we had faith that God truly wants what is best for us and for all creation?

I love that the Psalm we sang today is paired with this text from Isaiah in our lectionary. It is such an affirmation of God's presence with us whether our call takes us into a "desolate pit" or a "miry bog."

Listening to my fellow clergy share at our every other month gathering on Friday, I can assure you that we "people of the cloth" are far from immune in terms of the cares and troubles of this world or the desire to shrink from one's call. In fact, after one dear heart's sharing about the trials and travails besetting her, I think a miry bog might look more like a resort at this particular time in her life. And, yet, as we affirmed, God is there. God is faithful. In fact, it is sometimes in those moments of the deepest distress that we can feel our feet feeling around and finally finding that faithful rock where we know that God is surely with us through whatever this world may throw our way. "I waited patiently for God, and God put a new song in my mouth."

We cannot know what our future holds, but we do know that our God is always part of whatever comes next as sure as God is present in what is right now. And what is God calling to us?

To listen. (sing, "Listen...")

Listen to my voice; listen to where I am calling you; listen past the fear for I am always with you. I will go with you through the fire and through the storm and through the earthquake. But you must listen.

How often do we go about our lives every single day without taking one moment to listen? How often do we just hope that each thing will "turn out somehow" without turning to God for guidance? Be still and know that I am God. Be still and listen for that stillspeaking voice that is always there for us.

As we move into this new year, what is God calling you to? What is calling us as a church to? Where will we go this year; and how will God use us to bring about more love, more peace, more joy and more caring in this world that we may co-create the kin-dom with our Creator?

An excerpt from "**Help Me to Believe in Beginnings**" by Ted Loder

God of history and of my heart,

so much has happened to me during these whirlwind days:

I've known death and birth;

I've been brave and scared;

I've hurt, I've helped;

I've been honest, I've lied;

I've destroyed, I've created;

I've been with people, I've been lonely;

I've been loyal, I've betrayed;

I've decided, I've waffled;

I've laughed and I've cried.

You know my frail heart and my frayed history—and now another day begins.

O God, help me to believe in beginnings
and in my beginning again,
no matter how often I've failed before.

Help me to believe in beginnings,
to make a beginning,
to be a beginning,
so that I may not just grow old,
but grow new
each day of this wild, amazing life
you call me to live
with the passion of Jesus Christ.

Amen.