

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, March 20, 2016)

Text(s), beginning with Liturgist's comments:

"Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD!" The psalmist's words we spoke as our Call to Worship earlier in our service set the scene for our entrance into the events of Holy Week. Today on Palm Sunday we, too, shout our praises. Later, Jesus will move beyond the jubilant crowds toward the true revelation of his identity and purpose on the cross. And we will follow, quieting our voices as we enter into the passion of our God.

Today's lectionary scripture, drawn from the Book of Isaiah in the Hebrew Testament speaks of a servant figure -- perhaps an unknown individual or a personification of the whole nation. Though treated harshly and unfairly, the servant trusts in God's vindication.

In our Christian tradition we have found a resonance between the servant's experience and Jesus' suffering as he faced the cross. What else can we learn from this beautiful passage today?

Isaiah 50:4-9a (NRSV)

The Lord God has given me
the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.
Morning by morning God wakens—
wakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.
The Lord God has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backward.
I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those
who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.

The Lord God helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
the One who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.
Who are my adversaries?
Let them confront me.
It is the Lord God who helps me;
who will declare me guilty?
All of them will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up.

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **“Morning by Morning: Listening as Those Who are Taught”**

The verses from another piece of scripture continued to resonate in my head as I lived with our text for today, “If God be for us who can be against us” as found in Romans 8, verse 31. For here in today’s scripture from Isaiah 50, we see a servant of God, beset by those who would strike him, insult him, spit at him and do all manner of evil against him, standing strong in his faith and, in a manner that calls to mind the Christ and His passion, continues to affirm God as helper and vindicator and feels God’s presence and steadfastness even in the midst of degradation and harm.

Looking at the placement of our text in its historical context, it can be helpful to understand, as Pastor Jamie McCallum tells us on Baylor University’s excellent blog, “The Truett Pulpit,” that “Isaiah 50 is in the second half of Second Isaiah, [and was] penned toward the end of the Babylonian Exile. [At this time] King Cyrus of Persia has overcome Babylon’s dominance in the region and is establishing a new empire. Isaiah 50 [which we have before us today] contains the third of four “servant songs” in Second Isaiah, each offering a testimony of humility and hope in the midst of Israel’s recent trials and future unknowns. The servant behind the song could be the prophet or the nation as a whole. Either way, the message remains the same.”

“As those in captivity,” he continues, “the people of Israel have not known a place of power and independence for some time. The opening verses of [this passage] reflect on what got them there: namely their sins and deafness to God’s call. God’s people like sheep had gone astray. In their place of exile, however, refinement has come, and the one who once turned his back on God instead proclaims, “I gave my back to those who struck me.”

“Turning toward God ,” Pastor McCallum asserts, “does not immediately release Israel from captivity and return them to a place of power and dominance. Rather, it teaches them to be a people steady in the face of suffering, humble in the midst of opposition, and hopeful when things continue to go another way.”

What a testimony for us as people of Christ today as we near the culmination of our Lenten Journey with Jesus and enter this Holy Week where we will once again look on the suffering and the slaying of the flesh and celebrate the steadfastness and eternal life of the Spirit.

Throughout all of history we humans have been faced with the pain and degradation of our bodies and the bodies of our loved ones. This past week has been an especially brutal one for at least one of our members, Cynthia Maldonado, for whom we have been praying often and for whom suffering and pain has been most evident this week as her young nephew collapsed unexpectedly on Wednesday and fell into a coma at the same time her father was being hospitalized. And yet Cynthia’s first response was to acclaim God’s power and to call and ask for all of us to be in prayer with her and her family as they endure these trials and tribulations. Her faith remains steadfast and strong even in the midst of such pain and confusion.

I’m always cautious when speaking of the power of faith from this pulpit, however, as I know that there are times when our faith is tested and when many of us wonder at the veracity of God and God’s kin-dom. This, I believe, is not something to be ashamed of or even to deny for I know that God welcomes our questions and is all about working with and within us to bring us to an understanding that benefits not only ourselves but all people everywhere.

To my mind, this is a huge part of what our scripture is talking about today and what the entirety of our Lenten journey and this Holy Week is all about.

Bruce Sanguin, in his extraordinary book, “If Darwin Prayed,” puts it beautifully into context for the whole of our lives I think when he writes that, “Jesus’ death and resurrection becomes a pattern for our own spiritual evolution. As we die to all the old narratives, beliefs, and assumptions that keep us attached to our small, egotistical selves, we are raised into a larger, broader, and more encompassing Self – an Easter Self of cosmic proportions, motivated not by fear and mere survival

but by the prospect of being an agent of sacred, evolutionary intelligence, capable of being a source of new life and the presence of love that is always rising up in the service of life.”

“Morning by morning God wakens—wakens my ear-to listen as those who are taught” our text says today. Awakening each morning with a spirit of wonder and giving ourselves up to God to be taught before we head into our day, we hear the words of our eternal teacher guiding us to the right path, enabling our evolution to occur that we might not only bring love to this world and those we meet on our daily journey, but that we ourselves may BE, to paraphrase Ghandi, “the [LOVE] that [we] wish to see in the world” and in our lives.

In looking at the people of Israel and what’s happening with our Servant in today’s text, the Rev. Dr. James Matthew Price, in his article, “Words for the Weary,” picks up on this daily immersion in God’s Word and God’s will when he notes that, “In contrast to the obstinate disobedience of the people, the Servant stands as a singular figure capable of living in what Nietzsche, in [his] work, “Beyond Good and Evil,” called “long obedience in the same direction; there thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living.” The Servant admits to having a “well-taught tongue” (MSG). [Dr. Price writes] It is the ability to speak from hard-won ideals derived not from the scattered dreams of starry nights but in the full light of the morning. The Servant has been gifted with the “tongue of a teacher” (NRSV) or in another rendering, “the tongue of disciples” (NASB). Both are essentially correct interpretations, for the only way to teach is to learn, [and] the only way to lead [is] to be able to follow.”

I know many of you here today are or have been in the teaching profession. I would submit that we are all of us teachers as we trod this spiritual path. And as all good teachers know, the only way to truly learn is to listen well to what is being taught and the best way to teach is to follow and learn from where your students lead you. I know that for me, my best teaching has always emerged when I’m truly listening as a student myself, knowing that I have so much more to learn and to grow from listening as I walk my own path and truly hear those around me.

“Every educator knows there is nothing to teach that we didn’t first learn, and learn well,” Patricia Tull, Professor Emerita at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary, asserts. “The speaker [here in our text today] describes himself listening every morning to God’s instruction, willingly, persistently, eagerly... He expresses hope that God sees injustice and exercises compassion, and that the appropriate human stance before God is to lift up hearts and hands. He seeks resolution neither in understanding nor in outcome. He simply prescribes a response, a stance of creaturely hope that God’s goodness will in the end prevail, a stance of hope sturdy enough to withstand affliction, a stance that maintains integrity without defensiveness and humility without abjectness.”

A high and mighty bar this Servant presents to us. A life lived and a faith held as will be mirrored in Jesus centuries later. “Let us stand up together,” the Servant cries, “it is God who helps [us].”

As we make our way down the path toward the cross this week, let us keep in mind this hopeful and encouraging passage from Isaiah, knowing that come what may God is for us and that joy will surely come in the morning as that bright and glorious day of resurrection lies just around the corner.

“Morning Poem” by Mary Oliver

Every morning
the world
is created.
Under the orange

sticks of the sun
the heaped

ashes of the night
turn into leaves again

and fasten themselves to the high branches—
and the ponds appear
like black cloth
on which are painted islands

of summer lilies.
If it is your nature
to be happy
you will swim away along the soft trails

for hours, your imagination
alighting everywhere.
And if your spirit
carries within it

the thorn
that is heavier than lead—
if it's all you can do
to keep on trudging—

there is still
somewhere deep within you
a beast shouting that the earth
is exactly what it wanted—

each pond with its blazing lilies
is a prayer heard and answered
lavishly,
every morning,

whether or not
you have ever dared to be happy,
whether or not
you have ever dared to pray.

Amen.