

SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk (Delivered on Sunday, January 2, 2022)

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.

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."

Text: **Psalms 40:1-11** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Unyielding I called to you Yahweh, now at last you have stooped to me and answered my cry for help. You have pulled me out of the Pit of Destruction, out of its mud and quicksand; you set my feet on a rock and made my steps firm. You put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to you. Many will look on in wonder and so will put their trust in you. Happiness comes to those who put their trust in Yahweh, instead of in human egos or people blind to the truth! How many wonders you've worked for us, Yahweh, my God! How many plans you've made for us; You have no equal! I want to recount them again and again, but their number is too great. You don't desire sacrifice or oblation, instead you made my ears receptive to you; you asked no burnt offering or sacrifice for sins from me. And so I declared, "Here I am! I have come! In the scroll of the book it is written about me." I desire to do your will, my God, and your law is written in my heart. I'll proclaim your justice in the Great Assembly, and I won't keep my mouth shut, as you well know. I have never kept your generosity to myself but announced your faithfulness and saving action; I have made no secret of your love and faithfulness in the great assembly. For your part, Yahweh, don't withhold your love from me! Let your kindness and faithfulness constantly protect me!

Reflecting with Pastor Donald Shenk:
“I Believe In Beginnings”

Will you pray with me...

God of Isaiah, you are our God, too. You spoke to the prophets, but your message did not end with them. There is still work to be done, and we pray to hear your call afresh. Help us joyfully claim our role as your beloved servants, knowing that you provide all that we need to do our work.

You walked with us before we were even born, and you continue to hold us by the hand each and every day of our lives.

We pray with the confidence of those who have been filled with your light. We pray with the assurance of those who have been called into fellowship with your child, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Our passage from Isaiah for today, was penned by a person scholars tells us we can only identify as “the unknown servant.”

There are a lot of unknown servants we encounter in our lives. Those for whom God’s call is a profound and empowering one, but those who may work behind the scenes, shining their light brightly, but not necessarily on themselves.

It’s tempting to think that only those who stand in front, or speak into a microphone or appear regularly on a screen are the ones God has called to serve, but it’s just not true.

God calls to each one of us, even before we were born(!) to live into our calling as children of the most high - to care for one another and to work through our fears and our insecurities-bringing them before our ever loving and ever-patient God that we may begin afresh not just at the beginning of each year but throughout all of our lives.

And often that kind of work and that kind of care are done without any seeking after recognition or thanks, rather it’s responding to God’s call to continually speak hope in the midst of hopelessness; and assure ourselves and one another that God is surely caring for each one of us and that God is forever offering salvation to anyone who will but listen and heed God’s call.

UCC writer 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.”

But we are often frightened to accept this kind of plan offered by God, aren’t we? 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, all the things that could possibly happen and keep us from making a difference, a new beginning in our lives and in the life of our church. So, just like the unknown servant writing in Isaiah, it can be

tempting to think that all of OUR work has been in vain and there's no point to starting over yet again.

As the news fills our hearts and heads every day about some new variant of the CORONAVIRUS and world powers flex their military muscles and the glaciers continue to melt, it can be far too easy to give into fear and the big lie that the devil's in control and there's no hope to be had, so why begin again or keep on keeping on?

How 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 talk with my dear parents back east every week, my awareness increases exponentially of the fragility of this human life and the tenuousness of my own lifeline as it is connected to them and to my past and even to who I have become.

For I know that the cycle of life is going to bring about an ending as surely as it brought about a beginning and that can be truly frightening. In fact, God's call to be faithful in the midst of our fears and the possibility of our own ending is one of the most difficult things we experience as humans. And our tendency to feel that the work we do with God holds no meaning can often lead us to giving up and giving in and never starting afresh again. Instead of responding with, "here I am, Lord, send me", we might often find ourselves in a corner hoping and praying that somebody else will respond first—some OTHER unknown servant, a braver one, perhaps, or at least a younger one!

But of what use is this hiding, truly? As the servant in Isaiah says, "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?

But then, as is often the case, I hear Shakespear's voice ringing in my ears, "Lord, what fools these mortals be!" I mean 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? To have faith that God truly wants what is best for us and best for all of creation? That God is creating a new heaven and a new earth and a new beginning for each one of us?

Our Psalm for today is such an affirmation of God's presence with us no matter if our call is a loud one or a quiet one or whether it takes us into a "desolate pit" or a "miry bog." Listening to fellow clergy share at our every other month gathering on Fridays, 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 or trying to begin again after a setback. In fact, after one dear heart's sharing about the trials and travails besetting her at their particular church, I think a miry bog might look more like a spa vacation at times. And, yet, we affirm, God is there. God is faithful. God helps us to begin again.

In fact, it is sometimes in those moments of the deepest distress that we can sense 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 and creating a new way forward for us to follow. "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 happening to us and around us right now. And what is God calling to us? To listen and to begin anew.

Listen to my voice; listen to where I am calling you; listen past the fear of what's happened before or even happening right now for I am with you through it all and creating a new beginning for you in every moment. I will be with you when the virus assails, and I will be with you when you rise and begin again.

As we move into this new year, and consider God's full embrace of all that we are, what new beginning is God calling you to embrace for your life and for the life of our church?

What is God asking us to let go of and what is God asking us to begin? Where will we go this year and what will we need to leave behind in order to get there? 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 God's realm of peace and prosperity on this earth?

Listen now to this excerpt from the amazing Ted Loder and his poem

"Help Me to Believe in Beginnings"

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 the Christ.

Amen.