

Sermon: You're Not Listening When You Don't Feel Safe

I'd like to start by having us imagine something together. You walk into a room the size of a small warehouse and it seems completely empty. There's no furniture. No windows. The only door is the one you came through. The walls are a dull grey. The only sound you hear is a little sniffing from the corner furthest away from you. You squint to see and can just make out that there's a little boy and a little girl crouched in the corner, in ragged clothes, holding on to each other and trying not to cry. Your heart breaks for them. You want to take them in your arms, comfort them, and take them away to safety but they start shaking and crying when you take the first step towards them. What do you do? [Pause and breathe deeply for effect] We'll be coming back to this image.

In the Children's Story, we talked about people who inspired us to shine but those aren't the only models we've had. We've also had people who taught us how we didn't want to be. And we've been taught by the stories we see, the stories we are told, and the stories we have to act in, sometimes unwillingly. These experiences shape how we see the world. Some of the stories teach us that life is basically good and evil is just something to be overcome. I like those ones. Some say that the world is a terrible place and anything good is just a temporary disturbance of the natural order. When I wake up at 3 am, this is what I fear might be true. And some stories say that the world is neither good nor bad so whatever happiness we have is strictly a result of what we make for ourselves. In other words, look out for number 1. Many of us come to believe that we live in a world that must be approached with an aggressively defensive posture if we are to survive. To

quote a heavy metal song, “Hey you, hey you, finally you get it. This world, it will eat you if you let it.”

And what stories have we been told about God? We have the story of a God who asks Abraham to sacrifice his son and then stops him at the last second once he sees the obedience he was looking for. We have the God who so loved the world that he sent his only son to save us. We hear of the God who is so angered by our sin that he wipes out masses of humanity with flood, plague, warfare, and angels. We hear of the God for whom sin is so intolerable that it must be punished by death. Fortunately for us, that God is willing to exploit a legal loophole to accept the death of his innocent son instead of giving the rest of us what we deserve. Now I’m intentionally ignoring a lot of theological work that helps us to see these Biblical stories in a better light. I’m doing this because in speaking with a lot of people about their faith over the years, these are the ideas of God that many people retain at some level. A God who is love, but also anger. A God who demands absolute obedience. A God who is all-powerful but is simultaneously bound by an inflexible concept of justice.

I painted these bleak pictures so that I could show by contrast the beauty of what is in our two readings today. The reading from Isaiah is set at a time when Israel was divided, having had its land ravaged and its people dispersed and enslaved. In the thinking of their time, their God seemed to have been defeated by the Babylonian gods. You would not blame them for wanting an action revenge movie response from God. But that’s not what Isaiah shows us when he describes the servant beloved by God. This servant will bring justice without raising his voice. This servant will not break a bruised reed or extinguish a dimly burning wick. This servant will persist until justice has been established. When I hear “bruised reed”, I

think of those who are beaten down by life in some way, the chronically suffering, the mentally ill, or just those of us going through times that are difficult enough that we can't take another harsh word about our shortcomings or mistakes. And when I hear the phrase "dimly burning wick," I think of those whose external or internal condition leaves them barely holding onto life, on the verge of giving up on taking another breath whether for physical or emotional reason. Fortunately, the servant of God is not here to break us fragile people.

Isaiah then talks about the role God has in mind for God's people. We are "a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness." To open the eyes of the blind seems like a worthy task for us - to bring the truth about God and our role in God's kingdom to those who are not aware of it - in other words, to spread the good news. And then we come to the freeing of prisoners, an image that is found repeatedly in the Bible. In Biblical times, these prisoners would have been actual criminals, people who couldn't repay debts, political prisoners, sometimes people imprisoned for their faith. And God intends ministry and hope of salvation to all of them. But there are even more prisoners than this today. Those who are addicted, those whose pride prevents them from finding peace with their family and neighbors, those who are unforgiving of themselves, those trapped in abusive relationships, and more. We may see them as weak or stubborn but that may not be their whole truth.

And one category that is particularly meaningful to me. Many of you have stood in front of this church and given testimony of what you have seen and experienced. That testimony has shown me how many deeply capable and lovely people are carrying around cruel words from childhood or influential

relationships - words that are a prison in their own way, a harsh vision of themselves that is hard to escape. A judgment that consumes valuable energy to refute when it shouldn't be necessary. We are too often prisoners of who we think we are or who we have been told we are. Isaiah tells us that God's people are here to liberate all these prisoners.

But going back to the description of God's beloved servant, was Isaiah predicting Jesus? It certainly seems so to me. Jesus was gentle with the bruised reeds and the dim wicks, the tax collectors, prostitutes, the sick and the hopeless. If Jesus walked into the large empty room with the two scared children, I have no doubt he would walk out with them feeling safe in his arms. But was Isaiah speaking only of Jesus? The commentaries on the readings contained an interesting suggestion to view this description of God's servant not as a painting or photograph but as a silhouette. What does that mean? That it's not the depiction of one person but a set of attributes by which we can recognize any of God's beloved servants, of whom Christ is foremost. The character of such a servant is shown by his or her actions. Those actions are within our capability, which hopefully means that character is also something to which we can aspire.

But let's stick with Jesus, as we see him in the baptism story that Nancy read from Matthew. Now John was offering the sacrament of forgiveness through baptism to all who confessed their sins and repented. When Jesus shows up asking to be baptized, we're told John's reaction. "Me baptize you? Why bother? You don't have any sins. You should be baptizing me." It seems as odd as an unemployed engineer pontificating from the pulpit while a minister relaxes in the pews, secure that her job is in no danger. But Jesus wants to be baptized in front of witnesses, for the sake of righteousness. Why though? We know the passage from Isaiah would have

been something Jesus studied as scripture. The commentaries implied that just as I might be inspired and shaped by comic books, Jesus could plausibly have shaped his own character based on the passages he loved in scripture and Isaiah's would have been a great one to choose. So this humility to be baptized by John could have been a natural consequence of that.

Instead of following that idea, I'd like to go off the trail and into the weeds. I found the timing of events in Matthew's account curious. John is baptizing people, Jesus shows up, John says how about you baptize me, Jesus says let's do it the traditional way for the moment, they do the baptism, and only then does God open up the heavens and endorse Jesus as his beloved Son with words and the Holy Spirit. I've heard this story frequently so I didn't really think about it until I had to prepare this message. I started thinking about the Israelites during their many persecutions hoping for their Hollywood Messiah action revenge movie. I wondered how the story of Jesus might have gone if they'd gotten their wish. So much so that I wrote the first line of the call to worship as if it was a voiceover from that movie's trailer. So in my action movie, things take a different sequence. John is baptizing people in the Jordan. Jesus quietly walks up alone, maybe dressed like Clint Eastwood with a cowboy hat and a poncho hiding his six shooters. John says "it's you, the man I've been preparing for." The heavens open up at this point and God gives Jesus superpowers and divine authority. Jesus takes over from John and baptizes him and all who are present. They form the army of the Lord and spread across Israel, baptizing, gaining new followers and liberating the country and then the world. Finally everyone is happy under a single divine kingdom on earth with Jesus as its benevolent dictator. At least until the sequel.

So this led me to grapple with why God would have done things the way Matthew describes it. Let's take another little side trip. Let's think about how we persuade people to adopt an idea. Assuming the idea is not obviously terrible, a significant factor in persuasion is that the listener trusts the speaker. And why do we trust a speaker? The reasons tend to fall into three categories. First, the speaker has the ability to deliver on their promises. Let's just take for granted that God has that ability. The Bible and our lives are full of demonstrations of it.

The second element of trust comes from believing that the speaker has integrity. You believe that they are honest, principled, and that their actions will match their words. One way to demonstrate integrity when your listener doesn't know you well is to put what my professional colleagues called "skin in the game." When someone takes on personal risk just by being part of the idea, they gain more of our trust. We assume if they share the pain of the idea going badly, they're less likely to abandon or betray us.

The final element of trustworthiness is benevolence, that you mean well and mean no harm, making the other person feel they are safe with you. I remember being in heated interactions where I or the person I was interacting with seemed to be completely unable to listen at all, usually because we felt threatened by something. It could be something that had actually been said. It could be something that we feared was about to happen. It could be anything. So here's a good time to return to that large grey room with the scared little boy and little girl. When you encounter them, what do you do first? You need their trust to persuade them to come with you but I'm thinking now is not the time to show off your ability. It's not going to be possible to demonstrate integrity in the time you have either. So that leaves you trying to show your benevolence. How do adults who are

good with scared or traumatized children approach them? They start by kneeling or sitting on the ground so that they can be at eye level with the child instead of towering over them intimidatingly. They sit quietly with an open body posture for as long as is needed for the child to settle down. They let the child make the approach if possible. They talk gently but in direct, non-patronizing language that respects the intelligence of the child.

And I marveled at the wisdom of a God who takes such an approach with us. I saw a God who took human form and all its limitations, dropping down to be at our level and putting his skin in the game. I saw a God who lived quietly among us as just a man for about 30 years, letting us get comfortable with him. I saw a God who let his human incarnation be baptized by a man before receiving his divine mantle, letting us feel we were making the first move. And then in the ministry of Jesus, I saw a God who spoke to us directly and honestly to persuade us to go with him to safety.

So what are we to do with this? Isaiah tells us to bring truth and freedom to the world and we have the life and teachings of Jesus to show us how. To me however, the unexpected lesson from the baptism of Jesus, reflecting the silhouette of the beloved servant of God in Isaiah, is the posture we are to adopt as we serve. We have a God who brought himself to our eye level so that we would be trusting enough to listen to the good news. We have a savior, who was humble, vulnerable, protective of the suffering, compassionate to the weak, and patient and gentle in how he treated people. And we have instruction to go forth and be likewise. So let's practice putting aside our aggressively defensive posture for increasing amounts of time each week until we don't need to wear it at all. And let us be the people of God. Amen.