

Jesu Juva

“The Successful Failure”

Text: Isaiah 49:1-13 (with Second Passion Reading)

We learn a little bit more about God’s Servant this week in the Second Servant song of Isaiah. We hear *some* of the same themes as last week, but also more. And one of the first things we heard tonight was that ***the Lord called [the servant] from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name***. Last week the Servant was identified as that one who was anointed by the Spirit to do this work - a prophecy fulfilled in Jesus’ baptism - but this week we find out that this Servant was chosen long before that. That from the moment of His conception, while He was still in His mother’s womb, He had received His name. And with His name, His task, His work. Or as Matthew (1:21) tells us: *His name is Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins*. And of this one, Isaiah tells us: *His weapon will be His Word, and God will be glorified in Him*.

So far, so good. Except . . . the Servant’s work seems like failure. ***I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity***, we heard. And that’s the way it was, isn’t it? The Jewish leaders rejected Jesus. The folks of His own hometown wanted to throw Him off a cliff. Many who followed Him at the beginning left when His teachings got tough. And in the end, even though He was welcomed into Jerusalem by crowds on Palm Sunday, He dies on the cross virtually alone. Forsaken by God and abandoned by men.

By all appearances, the Word that is His weapon, that He sowed for three years, all either fell on rocky ground where it sprang up by had no root and so was scorched by the sun of trouble and tribulation, or among thorns where it was choked by the cares and worries of life, or on the path where it was snatched away by satan (Matt 13).

And still today it often looks that way. The Word of God looks weak compared with the powerful wisdom of the world. The Word of God is rejected and ridiculed. Christians are mocked and belittled. And the crowds are not in churches, but at football games, rock concerts, and beaches. By all appearances then, it seems like the more things change, the more they stay the same. ***I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity***. And maybe it seems that way in your life as well. The Word of God hasn’t been able to solve my problems, give me what I need, or fix my life.

But although that may be what things look like, what God says next is completely different! For not only is the Servant not a failure, but, God says: ***It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up [just] the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth***. Now, that may sound a little like saying: *I can’t lift a pound so instead I’ll lift a hundred!* But it’s not. Rather, it’s God asserting that there is

seed that falls on good ground. That what looks like failure is, in fact, so successful, that it's not just for the salvation of Israel, but for the life of the world. And that, of course, as we know, is the reality of the cross, where the Servant dies that all might live; where the Servant is condemned that all might be justified; where the Servant is forsaken that no one need be forsaken again. And so what looks like utter failure and abject defeat is in reality the greatest victory and the most glorious triumph.

And this Servant then, will shepherd His flock. That's what Isaiah says next. That though He die, yet shall He live. And living, to those He brings in His exodus out of sin and death He says: ***They shall feed along the ways; on all bare heights shall be their pasture; they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them.***

And so is the Servant, your Jesus, doing for you. In the Passion reading tonight we heard: ***I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered. But after I am risen again, I will go before you into Galilee.*** And then He was struck, the flock was scattered, and three days later He did rise again. And so He is a living Shepherd, who will never die again. Your Shepherd, who is still going before you and fulfilling and keeping all His promises to you.

Which doesn't mean a care-free and trouble-free life. If that were so, we wouldn't need a Shepherd! But it is exactly because we live in a world filled with cares and troubles that it is so important and precious that we have a Shepherd, a Saviour.

And so Isaiah concludes this Servant song with the words: ***Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people and will have compassion on his afflicted.*** Or in other words, sing and exult not because the troubles have gone away, but because you have the comfort and compassion of your Good Shepherd, Jesus, in the midst of them. The one who went through it all with us and for us, and so knows what it's like and knows what you need. And don't judge by appearance or feelings whether He is successful or not, whether He is giving you what you need or not - judge rather, by the cross. The cross which shows us that what looks like defeat is really victory.

For there is the Servant, for you. There is the forgiveness you need, the life you need, the salvation you need. There He is covering you in the shade of his love. There protecting you from the evil one. Come eat and drink of Him and you will never hunger or thirst again.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.