

Sermon for January 19, 2020 - 2nd Sunday after Epiphany

Theme: Listen to the Divine Conversation Concerning your Salvation.

- 1) The LORD has appointed His Servant.
- 2) The Servant struggles for the LORD.
- 3) The LORD blesses His Servant's work.

Listen to me, you coastlands. Pay attention, you faraway peoples! The LORD called me from the womb. When I was inside my mother, he mentioned my name. ²He made my mouth like a sharpened sword. He hid me in the shadow of his hand. He made me a polished arrow. He concealed me in his quiver. ³He said to me, "You are my servant Israel, in whom I will display my glory." ⁴But I said to myself, "I have labored in vain. I spent my strength and came up empty, with nothing. Yet a just verdict for me rests with the LORD, and my reward is with my God." ⁵But now the LORD, who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to turn Jacob back to him, so that Israel might be gathered to him, so that I will be honored in the eyes of the LORD, because my God has been my strength- ⁶the LORD said It is too small a thing that you should just be my servant to raise up only the tribes of Jacob and to restore the ones I have preserved in Israel, so I will appoint you to be a light for the nations, so that my salvation will be known to the end of the earth.

"Everything I do seems to be in vain." I am certain all of us here have felt like this at some point in our lives – especially when it comes to telling someone about Jesus. Our straying family members and unbelieving friends – they just don't seem to get it when we try to explain to them what the Bible says about sin and, more importantly, what Jesus did to save us. They look at us as if we were a child trying to convince them that the tooth fairy was real. Worse yet, they seem to avoid us – claiming that we aren't loving because we make them feel bad.

We are tempted to wonder: Does it really matter what a person believes? Our church says it does, but many people, who are very sincere in their beliefs, say it doesn't. Maybe we should just keep quiet and let people believe whatever they want to believe.

The devil likes to frustrate us – all in an attempt to both prevent us from sharing the Gospel with others and to try to get us to fall from faith as well. Would it, then, shock you to hear that Jesus faced the temptation to think that his ministry was in vain? He certainly did. But whenever the devil tempted him with thoughts of frustration, he did two things: he reminded himself that he was carrying out his Father's will and trusted that his Father would bless his efforts - just as he promised.

With our wonderful Saviour as our guide, let us be encouraged to keep on confessing Christ, under the theme: **Listen to the Divine Conversation Concerning your Salvation.** 1) The LORD has appointed His Servant. 2) The Servant struggles for the LORD. 3) The LORD blesses His Servant's work.

Part One: The LORD has appointed his servant.

Some 700 years before his human birth, the eternal Son of God inspired the prophet Isaiah to record an important message meant for all people throughout the world.

Listen to me, you coastlands. Pay attention, you faraway peoples! The LORD called me from the womb. When I was inside my mother, he mentioned my name.

Jesus did not choose to be the Saviour of the world the same way a person chooses to be a farmer, janitor, doctor or accountant. No, God the Father appointed His eternal Son for this work from before the beginning of the world. At the moment of his incarnation, the eternally begotten Son of God became Jesus: our great champion sent into the world to defeat every plan and purpose of the devil. And if Jesus' identity was declared by God at the moment of his conception in the womb of His mother, we can be certain that ours was too.ⁱ Yes, already at our conceptions, we were exactly who God made us to be. Is it any wonder then why Christians are horrified at our society's acceptance of abortion?

But let's get back to Jesus. While allowing Him to retain His divine right as Son, God nevertheless made his Jesus a servant to rescue all people from their bondage to sin, death and the power of the devil.ⁱⁱ So, with what weapons was Jesus equipped to fight for our salvation? The Saviour tells us: *²He made my mouth like a sharpened sword. He hid me in the shadow of his hand. He made me a polished arrow. He concealed me in his quiver.*

Now, to the inexperienced, "words" might not seem all that powerful compared to a knife, gun, bomb or army. While that might be true regarding human words, it certainly is not the case when it comes to God. God says: *my word that goes out from my mouth will not return to me empty. Rather, it will accomplish whatever I please, and it will succeed in the purpose for which I sent it.*ⁱⁱⁱ Yes, whenever God speaks, stuff happens! By means of His Word, Jesus healed the sick, raised the dead and even created this vast universe.

Jesus is the Word of God.^{iv} The entire Bible is about him.^v He is the Gospel – the good news of salvation. By the power of his Word, he makes the blind see, deaf hear, the

lame walk and raises the dead.^{vi} Is it any wonder that the apostle John, when describing a vision he saw of Jesus after his resurrection, says *A sharp two-edged sword was coming out of his mouth.*^{vii}

Yes, Jesus's Word (his law and Gospel) are powerful weapons – having an effect on Jew and Gentile alike (hence the description of sword and arrow). But Jesus says that the LORD kept him hidden and concealed – that is to say, the people of Isaiah's time didn't know Jesus yet. Why? Because, just as a security guard with a concealed weapon will not publicly pull it out until the time comes to use it, so also the LORD kept his great weapon hidden and concealed until the time came to win our salvation.

And when that time came, Jesus was born. And God the Father declared: *"You are my servant Israel, in whom I will display my glory."* Yes, Jesus truly is the glory of God the Father. To see Jesus' holiness, patience, love, and forgiveness is to see God's mercy towards mankind. Since Jesus lived in our place under the law, becoming a servant like us in order to represent all of God's people. And as a servant, he only did the will of our master – perfectly serving him in our place. Unlike us, Jesus never talked back to God. Unlike us, he was never hesitant to do the difficult things His Father asked. He perfectly loved and trusted His Master. He did this to win the righteousness we need to stand before God.

Yes, Jesus is God's chosen servant, through whom the Father is glorified – but he isn't the only person chosen by the LORD to serve him. Every Christian here has been known and chosen by God to be His representatives on earth. At our baptisms, he marked us as his own. Through His Word and Sacraments, he makes himself known to us – revealing the height and depth of his love for fallen mankind. We are his servants – saved by means of Jesus' bloody sacrifice of himself on the cross. We've been bought at a price.^{viii} And now the LORD calls us to duty.

The way the LORD wants us to serve him is simple: love God and love your neighbor. As simple as this sounds, the only way we can do this is by basking in God's love for us in Christ. The more we rejoice in our own salvation, the more we will want to tell other people about Jesus. His love is the power behind our love. His witness to God's great love is our witness. He is the reason for our living. He is our hope in dying. Jesus is our everything – the great servant of God who covers us in His righteousness to such a degree that we can't help but want to serve the LORD in thanksgiving.

This is how we feel when we focus on Jesus. But when we step out into the world? Well, then things get hard. The very people we love don't seem to want to be loved by us. They get annoyed at our confession – often demanding that we keep quiet. They accuse us of being unloving. They might even mock or persecute us because of the

Gospel. And when this happens day in and day out by the very people we love, we grow frustrated and tired – wondering if it’s all worth it. The devil uses this frustration to try to drive a wedge between us and God.

Part Two: The Servant struggles for the LORD.

Yes, frustration is a dangerous thing. But what can we do when we feel it? We can look to Christ and see how he handled it, as we hear Jesus speak in our text: *“But I said to myself, ‘I have labored in vain. I spent my strength and came up empty, with nothing.*

Can you imagine how frustrating Jesus' earthly ministry must have been? I mean, if any ministry should have been the easiest in the world, it should have been Jesus' right? He went to a people that were expecting him for over a thousand years. The whole Bible was written about him, and he even had his personal herald – John the Baptist – prepare the way for him.

But few listened to him. The Jewish rabbis rejected him. The people of his own hometown – Nazareth – tried to kill him.^{ix} While it is true that crowds of people came to see him whenever he entered a town, most people didn't actually believe in him. Just 5 days after a great crowd welcomed Jesus in Jerusalem with palm branches and shouts of Hosanna, a similarly sized crowd demanded his crucifixion. Yes, even one of Jesus' dearly loved disciples betrayed him. And, at the time he could have used his disciples the most, they all abandoned him.

Considering all these facts, it doesn't become all that hard to imagine Jesus being tempted to think: “Am I doing all this for nothing? Nobody believes me. Am I actually accomplishing anything?” Yes, we can certainly imagine the devil trying to get Jesus to fall into sin by plaguing him with such questions, just as he plagued him with questions during his 40 days in the wilderness. But our Saviour didn't fall. He reminded himself: *Yet a just verdict for me rests with the LORD, and my reward is with my God.”*

Jesus knew that God would be faithful to all his promises. Even though he was slandered and crucified, he was convinced that God would justify him – declaring him innocent of the sins he bore. He was also convinced that the LORD would restore him to his position he had before his incarnation. Regardless of how things looked, Jesus trusted that God would use everything he suffered and endured for the salvation of many. And that is exactly what happened, as we read:

Part Three: The LORD blesses His Servant's work.

⁵But now the LORD, who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to turn Jacob back to him, so that Israel might be gathered to him, so that I will be honored in the eyes of the LORD, because my God has been my strength- ⁶the LORD said It is too small a thing that you should just be my servant to raise up only the tribes of Jacob and to restore the ones I have preserved in Israel, so I will appoint you to be a light for the nations, so that my salvation will be known to the end of the earth.

Was Jesus' ministry all for nothing? No! Jesus' sacrifice paid for the sins of the entire world. And not only did it do that, but his ministry also gathered together a small core of Jewish believers, who, in turn, witnessed to other Jews. And those Jews witness to more Jews and the Church started to grow exponentially.

But that's not the only thing that happened. The LORD said that it's too small a thing to gather believers from among the Jews. God made Jesus ministry a light for the Gentiles - meant to give them a hope that most never imagined they could have: forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God. And what do we read in the book of Acts? That the Holy Spirit allowed the Gospel message of Jesus to spread like wildfire among the Gentiles. In a very short period of time, people in Northern Africa, Asia, and Europe got to hear the Gospel. God kept his promise to His Servant. His message was not in vain, but a glorious light for all people, leading countless millions to faith in Him. And the Servant's message of the Gospel is still being preached throughout the world. Countless people are still being brought to faith and saved through it – all in fulfillment of God's promise with his Son.

As I mentioned before, we too are the LORD's chosen servants. We proclaim the same message that Jesus did while he walked this earth: *“Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near.”*^x

Yes, we often are tempted to feel frustrated – wondering whether or not our witness is actually having any effect. When this happens, remember the promises that God the Father gave Jesus in our text. Because of those promises we can be certain that our confession of Christ will never be in vain. True, we may not see the immediate effect of the Word we witness. Sometimes months, years, or even decades will pass before something happens, but we can nevertheless trust that God's Word will have an effect. God is always glorified when we confess Christ in truth and purity. Just as the seeds planted by Jesus really sprouted and grew after his ascension, so the seed of the Gospel we plant today may take years before they produce fruit. But be sure, they will produce fruit. God will bless your witness, just as he blessed Jesus. And he will glorify you – just as he did for Jesus.

⁵⁸*Therefore, my dear brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the Lord's work, because you know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.^{xi} Amen!*

ⁱ Cf. Galatians 1:15

ⁱⁱ Cf. Phil 2:5ff and Hebrew 5:8

ⁱⁱⁱ Isaiah 55:11 EHV

^{iv} Cf. John 1:1ff

^v Cf. John 5:39

^{vi} Cf. Matthew 11:5

^{vii} Revelation 1:16 EHV

^{viii} Cf. 1 Corinthians 6:20

^{ix} Cf. Luke 4:29

^x Matthew 4:17 EHV

^{xi} 1 Corinthians 15:58 EHV