

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
2nd Sunday after the Epiphany
January 15, 2017

Your Higher Calling

Isaiah 49:1-7; John 1:29-42

Today's Old and New Testament readings are both of some length.
I considered whether they were too long to read both in worship,
but I decided to include them both.
I think you can handle them without wandering off.

The context for the readings matters.
For Isaiah, the context is that of the exiled community of Israel.
King Jehoiachin and his fellow exiles were carried to Babylon in the year 597 BCE.
Jehoiachin's father, King Jehoiakim had rebelled against the Babylonians,
breaking a treaty of fidelity sworn in the Lord's name,
thus profaning the name of God, and breaking the third commandment.
King Jehoiakim died before Jerusalem was captured by King Nebuchadnezzar,
so his 18 year old son, Jehoiachin,
along with the royal family and about 3,000 other citizens,
were carried into exile in Babylon.

As a result, Jehoiachin is suffering innocently on behalf of the disobedience of others.
It was not for his own sins that he is carried into exile,
but he is the one who pays the penalty required by the Old Testament Law
for defiling the holy name of God.¹

So Isaiah's words here are known as the one of the Songs of the Suffering Servant.
The prophet does not speak of himself,
but sings the song of Israel's Suffering Servant,
very likely King Jehoiachin.

So let us listen now, to the words of the prophet Isaiah,
and God's word to us...
READ ISAIAH 49:1-7

After 37 years of imprisonment in Babylon,
King Jehoiachin was released from prison
by the king who succeeded Nebuchadnezzar.
The exiled king was given a special status,
and the place of highest prominence at the Babylonian king's table,
a place above the other exiled kings who were with him in Babylon.

However, he never returned to Jerusalem,
but died in exile —
not quite the fulfillment of the prophecy for which he surely had hoped.

So we turn to the New Testament and to the Gospel of John.

About 6 centuries later, John is offering baptism
to those who still wait for the coming of Israel's deliverer,
the Messiah, the Great King who will save the people from their sin,
and the sin of their kings which have had such
dreadful political consequences,
and bring about the restoration of the kingdom.
John has been interrogated by priests and Levites from Jerusalem
as to just who he thinks he is
to be offering this baptism.
John has declared openly that he is not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet,
but merely "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
"Make straight the way of the Lord..."

So listen now to John,
and consider how his testimony carries forward the hope
proclaimed by Isaiah...

READ JOHN 1:29-42

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

*The LORD called me before I was born,
while I was in my mother's womb he named me
says the prophet Isaiah.*

When we hear these words
something within our own souls resonates.
We all, at some level, long to be recognized as significant,
to be treasured in God's sight,
to have a special place in God's plan,
to live a life that means something for the world and for history.

The American dream
is about improving ourselves, building a respectable life,
and perhaps even being one of the few who reach great heights of success.

And those who are successful will sometimes give the glory to God.
Take Dabo Swinney, for example.
After winning the National Championship on Monday,
he thanked the good Lord, and said it was all God's doing.
Not just that his Tigers had defeated Alabama to win the national title,
but he referenced the whole trajectory of his life
up to this pinnacle of success
was God's doing.

Indeed, Dabo's story is compelling.

And unlike other success stories it is refreshing to hear a successful person give the glory to God.

The bleary-eyed euphoria that swirls around our sports teams in this country is not unlike our culture's obsession with superheroes, and the ever-expanding run of movies about them, telling stories of how they discovered their powers, and came to an understanding of their deeper identity, which lifted them to their higher calling to save the world from evil.

These stories give expression to our fascination with the notion of destiny, of being chosen for specialness to make a difference in the world.

**There is something inside of us
that makes us feel that we are destined for greater things.**

Biblical faith would say, that's because we are.

We are indeed destined for great things,
the great things God intends for us,
even when our circumstances do not suggest it.

The Servant of Isaiah proclaims,

*He made me a polished arrow,
in his quiver he hid me away.*

The Lord said to me,

"You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

The song proclaims the high calling of the Servant
but also through him, the high calling of the whole people of Israel.

We are reminded of God's initial call of Abraham in Genesis.

Abraham and his descendants were chosen not just for their own sake,
but that through them
all the families of the earth would be blessed.

It is this first promise,

the originating promise of the people of Israel,
that the Servant Song of Isaiah recalls.

Israel is chosen for the sake of the many,
and God calls the chosen to live lives of significance
in order that the many may be blessed.

And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant...

*"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob*

and to restore the survivors of Israel;

I will give you as a light to the nations,

that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

In light of the historical disappointment of the political reign of all the kings of Israel,
the church has come to understand this prophecy to be fulfilled
in a new way.

The church believes that Jesus is the One in whom these songs of the Suffering Servant
are ultimately fulfilled.

So John sees Jesus coming toward him and declares

*"Here is the Lamb of God
who takes away the sin of the world!"*

And two of John's disciples hear this good news, and follow Jesus.

And seeing them following,

Jesus turns to them and asks,
What are you looking for?

Though they don't give him a proper answer,

clearly they are looking to see what great things he will do,
and they are looking to be a part of those great things,
and to be blessed by those great things,

and to have their own lives swept up into the higher calling
of the One who takes away the sins of the world.

And that is indeed what happens,

though, in the end, they surely got **much more than they were looking for**,
and at times, surely felt that they were getting **much less than they were looking for**.

Perhaps they hadn't paid attention in Sunday School
in the lesson that taught that the Servant of Isaiah
was a suffering servant!

And that is often the case for those who seek to serve God with their lives.

Things don't always turn out quite the way they imagine them.

But that's why Jesus says to those who would follow him,

Come and see.

We who seek to follow Jesus,

who have responded to his invitation to *Come and see*,
live life according to a higher calling.

But the key is this:

That higher calling is not so that we can think more highly of ourselves.

That significance is not for our own sake,
but for the sake of the world God loves.

We are like John the Baptist,
whose calling was to point away from himself
and point toward the One who takes away the sin of the world.

For a number of years Rodger Nishioka taught as a professor at Columbia Seminary.

He spoke of his feeling of privilege in journeying with his students
as they prepared for their call to ministry.

Nishioka admitted to finding it a bit of an audacious claim
for students to receive a degree called “Master of Divinity” —
and indeed it is a rather ridiculous title.
What worried him was that some of them, he could tell,
actually believed it!
They were the ones whom made him most nervous.
He said he wanted to meet them at the other end of the graduation stage
and scribble on their parchment the words,
“In Process!”

Nishioka had to learn this lesson for himself.
He tells the story of the time a colleague of his at the seminary
had become concerned about Rodger’s schedule and commitments
his hectic pace, and his looking tired all the time.
She insisted on taking him to lunch, saying it was urgent.

When they sat down, Rodger asked what was going on.
She told him she had good news for him.
Perplexed, he asked what the good news was.
She smiled, and said, “I want you to know the Messiah has come!”
Rodger was confused, so she told him she had even better news for him:
“Rodger, you are not him!”

So taking to heart the lesson from that period of his life,
Nishioka suggests we may be better of if,
instead of asking WWJD? — What Would Jesus Do? —
we were to ask WWJBD? — What Would John the Baptist Do?²

How does our life point to Jesus?

Simon Peter’s brother Andrew gets it right.
When he sees Jesus
the one who would bestow upon him the greatest significance of his life,
he goes to his brother Simon and says, in effect,
Come and see.

Like Andrew, this is our higher calling.
What steps can we take, even small steps,
to help the people closest to us, our family and friends,
and those within our reach,
to see Jesus,
to see the light who enlightens everyone?

At the risk of perpetuating the euphoria,
I have to say that there was one moment in this whole football frenzy
in which Dabo got it right:
When he said to his players,

“You have a light shining **in** you
that is brighter than the lights shining **on** you.”

Our higher calling does not put us in the limelight,
it may not bring us worldly success,
it may bring us suffering.

But shining the light of Christ is our higher calling.

And the world has never been in greater need of the light than it is today.
Now more than ever, let us come and see the light...

...and then go and be the light...

...that *God's salvation may reach
to the end of the earth.*

¹ John H. Hayes, *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010) p. 247.

² Roger Y. Nishioka, *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010) p. 264.