

Epworth Chapel on the Green
September 20, 2009
Pentecost 16
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 49:1-7
Psalm 54
James 3:16-4:6
Mark 9:30-37

In our Old Testament lesson this morning from Isaiah, we are introduced to one who is a little discouraged, who wonders if his efforts are productive and meaningful.

And because many see in Jesus the embodiment of these words from Isaiah 49, the question might naturally arise whether Jesus, during his earthly ministry, ever had these kinds of feelings.

Reading through Mark's Gospel, it might be easy to believe that he did. In today's lesson, Jesus has once again been pouring his energy into trying to teach the disciples his true purpose, that he was on a collision course with Jerusalem.

But after many weeks and even months of working with the disciples, he discovers here that they still do not understand, and instead they are posturing and arguing over which of them has the greatest status as Jesus' followers. After being with them for so long and trying to impress upon them what God's Kingdom really involves, he finds they still are more intent on pursuing their own interests.

One wonders, then, whether Jesus ever felt like the servant of Isaiah, whether he ever put his head in his hands and wondered if he was, as the writer of

Ecclesiastes puts it, “spitting into the wind.” Certainly if we remember and take seriously Jesus’ full humanity, then the question is not so far-fetched.

It is interesting to speculate about this, but in the end it’s not productive. For we simply do not know for sure. We cannot psychologize Jesus and know with certainty how he was feeling.

We can, however, look at our own feelings, and examine them. And it probably goes without saying that each of us goes through times in our life when we wonder whether our labor is in vain. Each of us has moments when we wonder if our life is productive. As we get older, we may look back our younger days when we aspired to do such noble and important things, and we may wonder whether or not we have fallen short or in some sense failed to accomplish those idealistic things.

And there are times when we labor hard and long at something, and we struggle to see any fruit of our labor. We, like the servant in Isaiah, can become discouraged, and we can wonder whether our efforts make any difference at all in the workplace or in the larger world. We may feel at times like we are spinning around in circles, with no measurable or discernible progress.

If you’re here today and you share some of these feelings, you’re not alone. Take heart, because the Lord’s servant in Isaiah and possibly even Jesus himself felt much the same way as you do.

But the Good News of the Gospel comes to us today not just from the Gospel, but from Isaiah. And the good news is that in the midst of our discouragement and doubt, God comes to us and gives us a word of comfort and strength.

In the midst of his discouragement, God came to the servant in Isaiah and assured him that his labors mattered. In fact, he tells the servant that not only do his efforts matter, but that God is using him to do far more good than he thinks he can do in his situation.

There is a telling phrase at the end of Isaiah 49:5. It says: “The Lord has honored me, and my God has given me strength.” God reaches out to this discouraged servant here, and assures him that he is doing far more good than he knows, even though he cannot see it just now.

And this Good News also has our names on it today. In those moments when you find yourself discouraged, when you find yourself struggling to see how your efforts in God’s service are meaningful, the Holy Spirit comes along side you, and bears you up. The Holy Spirit draws near to you, assuring and reassuring you that your labors are not in vain.

Sometimes this is done through the direct ministry of the Holy Spirit, speaking to you through prayer, or a hymn, or a quiet moment of reflection.

At other times, it may be that the Spirit speaks to you through an indirect encounter with someone. It may be through a short conversation with an auto mechanic, a cab driver, or a clerk in a store. A kind word may be exchanged, or an appreciative comment given, and through that brief moment the Holy Spirit comes along side you and bears you up.

And sometimes the Spirit ministers to you through a direct encounter. A friend, a coworker, a parent, a teacher, seeks you out and speaks words of affirmation and kindness. It is God's way of being faithful, reminding you that when you spend your energy for Him, you always do far more good than you know or realize.

A few years ago my father sent me one of those pieces of e-mail that circulate endlessly because people forward them on to their friends and families. It was in the form of a memo, and the memo was from God to the recipient. In it's trite way it said something like, "this is God. Today I will be handling all your problems. I do not need your help. So have a nice day."

And then there was a P.S. to the memo, where God provided further encouragement. At one point it said, "should you find yourself discouraged, at a loss, wondering what the purpose of your life is and pondering what life is all about, be thankful. There are many who didn't live long enough to get the opportunity."

Whether it's the servant of the Lord from Isaiah, or perhaps even Jesus himself, we've all been there. We've been at that place where we wonder whether what we're doing matters, whether it amounts to anything, and whether anyone cares.

Well, God cares. He cares more than you know. And in our moments of struggle, the Holy Spirit is faithful in his ministry to come along side us and to strengthen us.

As we come to the Lord's table this morning, let these tangible tokens of bread and wine be a means the Spirit uses to encounter you today. Let them be a reminder to you that He who began a good work in you will finish and complete it. Let them empower you to spend your strength for the Lord, looking not so much to the outcome, but to Him who has called you. For God is at work in you, giving you grace to do far more than you can see or imagine.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.