

“Here is my servant,” says the prophet, speaking for God, “I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.” The servant, who is never identified, is described as quiet (will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street), gentle (“a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench”), and persistent (“He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth”). Quiet, gentle, and persistent.

Christians have traditionally seen the servant as Jesus, and fair enough. However, Isaiah most certainly did not have Jesus of Nazareth in mind, a good six centuries before Jesus. So for Isaiah’s first readers, the lack of specificity about the servant’s identity may be intentional. You’re not supposed to go trying to match the job description with a particular historical person, perhaps, but recognize the servant’s job being performed/executed every time, and in every place, that you see it. In other words, the ministry of the servant is what it looks like every time the Kingdom of God appears.

This is one of a series of four so-called “suffering servant songs” in Isaiah, in which the servant is described as manifesting the characteristics of the kingdom but at tremendous personal cost. In Chapter 49, the servant complains that they have labored in vain, spent their strength for nothing and vanity. Whereupon the Lord responds, “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 end of the earth.” I’ve always read that as sort of bad news for the servant, who’s experienced no success and is now being given a more ambitious assignment. But perhaps not. Perhaps the widening of the

assignment is what makes it more life-giving. Let me try to explain.

The trauma of the exile, which lies behind Isaiah's prophesying, was among other things a disruption of a certain kind of privilege. Within Judea, anyhow, to have the Temple and to have a king descended from David was to know that you were doing everything right and within your little homeland all was in order, all was manageable. Priests did important things, prophets' arguments were taken seriously and commented upon, Samaritans and idolators were properly kept in their places. To be taken out of Jerusalem while the Temple and the palace burned was profoundly destabilizing, to say the least. Aside from the obvious losses that go with displacement, and aside from the gigantic theological questions about where God fit into this, there were smaller but considerable questions about ourselves and our worthiness. It's a little like being an A student suddenly graduated and thrust into the labor market, where none of the old status markers mean anything and many of your former skills simply don't matter. If you still believe that you are chosen by God, cherished by and special to God, put on this earth to lead a life that matters, how does this compute?

It computes when your mission is widened, when you're no longer going to keep things tidy in your little kingdom, but you're commissioned to bring light to *all* nations. Recall that the servant will not grow faint or be crushed until they have established justice *in the earth*, and the coastlands wait for their teaching. What does that look like? It looks like the litany from Isaiah 42, also found in Psalm 146: "I have given you as 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.” What we had in Judea was cozy and small; it has broken open so that it may embrace the world.

The reason I think we get this is that most of us are also survivors of a kind of exile, the diminishing of the church as a respected and influential institution in our society. Love it or hate it, it used to be kind of important when a minister wrote a letter to the editor, or when you were elected moderator of your congregation.

People used to join churches as a way of getting connected. Ministers were public intellectuals. That has all changed; Christendom is no more, and being a churchgoer does not confer higher status on you any longer. Part of me is glad about that, as it’s never a good thing when church and state or civil society are as cozy with each other as they were fifty years ago. I’m glad, too, that other faiths are throwing off second-class status. But I’m sad that people by and large don’t like churches, think that church is boring or that Christians are close-minded and mean-spirited. That doesn’t feel good, especially when I recognize that they have some grounds for believing so.

But here’s the thing: people are hungry for the sacred. Like the coastlands waiting for the servant’s teaching, people are looking for their connections to the transcendent, to the source of all meaning. We’re hungry for it too, but we search together, and share snatches of it with each other. Outside the church, I think everybody loves Christmas (those who do) because it speaks so directly and simply to our human hunger for relationship with the divine. People may get caught up in consumerism or office parties, but there is a deeper appeal to Christmas. Every Christmas newspapers and Facebook posts tell stories about giving, stories that

confirm somehow that there is hope, and that in kindness to one another we encounter sacredness. People seek out places to give to strangers in need. People are not quite surprised by surprises.

The undercurrent of Advent is that human beings are made for relationship with God (by whatever name you want to use). We long for the coming of God because it's so real, when God comes as an ordinary baby to ordinary people. Recognizing the face of God in the face of another person is our amazing access to what's holy. And so, if the coastlands are waiting for the servant's teaching, isn't it our mission to somehow convey this message that human beings are made for relationship with God, and to convey it in such a way that it is understood to be a gift?

Our new-ish tradition of taking plates of cookies to people who are at work on Christmas Eve is a very direct, simple enactment of this mission. That's probably why we like it so much. It's a way of singling out someone who may feel forgotten, and saying to them, "Christ is here for you! It's a party!" "God just showed up, and wanted to see you!" No strings attached, no expectations, just passing along the good news.

It is an odd thing to be asked to take on a more extended mission now that we've lost status and income. The usual ways of bestowing largesse upon the unfortunate are less possible than they used to be. But that's what I find intriguing. When we (the church writ large) had status and money, perhaps they were easy substitutes for something more meaningful. What do people *really* need, if not a pew shared with the mayor or a sonorous sermon from a minister who hobnobs

with the mighty? Glimpses of the kingdom. Are there other ways, more year-long ways than cookie plates, that we can offer those to the coastlands and the nations? We're looking for them ourselves, it's not like we've arrived; but we have our common habits and each other to sustain us on the journey.

God uses disruption to strip away our easy, automatic answers. In our own exile, but still expectant, we have something precious, and we need to figure out more ways to share it.

God of light, you sent a savior into the world to bring justice and release to all who are in bondage. Shine this light upon us, and show us how to bring justice and peace to all who suffer. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ,