

January 16, 2011: CALLED AND EMBODIED
Isaiah 49:1-7; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; Psalm 40:1-11
Eileen Parfrey - Springwater Presbyterian

Almost as if it had been planned this way—almost as if the lectionary committee anticipated not only our annual congregational meeting today but the media conversation this week about public servants and cultural violence. Almost as if this were part of God’s plan for equipping the church, today’s texts offer a new understanding of God’s call. On a Sunday when we report on our life together in 2010, Isaiah says our call is of a more universal scope than to just our family. On a Sunday when leadership is being held accountable, the apostle Paul invites the church to be community. After a week of public discourse about violence and political differences, Isaiah uses war imagery to speak of universal reconciliation. After a week of wondering about violence and loners, the apostle Paul reminds us that we’re not called to faith as individuals but as community. Uncanny, isn’t it? Almost as if it was planned.

I came of age reading literature and watching movies that romanticized the rugged individualist—the loner standing against injustice. Even scripture seems to glorify the individual called to an unpopular but godly purpose. An example of that is today’s passage from Isaiah which depicts the Servant as chosen even before birth for a special purpose. But, despite the conquering war hero imagery, the Servant lapses into self doubt and a sense of failure. When the Servant remembers God’s equipping for his special task, God broadens the scope of the Servant’s mission.

Wow. Who wouldn’t want *that*—to be God’s special helper? Where it gets sticky is figuring out *who* the Servant is. In Isaiah’s day, the Servant was understood to be Israel, the nation. It wasn’t until much later that this began to be read as a messianic text. So of course, the Church read this Servant as Christ and, by extension, his Body, the Church itself. The Servant’s call is our call, and if it’s “call,” that means we’re not working our own agenda, we’re working someone else’s. We’re supposed to act as if God is in charge. As Presbyterians, our way of going about being Church is biased toward living out that call in community. Our constitution reflects our belief that God’s Spirit uses community for discernment and is the vehicle for carrying out God’s mission. When we affirm what Isaiah says today about God equipping the Servant for God’s particular call, we mean that if God has a mission for us, God has also provided within our community the gifts for carrying out that mission.

But we’re embedded in a culture that tends to think “called” means, “In my case, an exception has been made.” This is not how to build community, and the apostle Paul gets on Corinth’s case about this later in his letter. Today, he sets the stage for proclaiming Christian faith as an alternative way of life, one lived in *community*—not “despite” differences but “because of” them, hinting that these differences might be part of God’s plan for equipping. Almost as if all along God’s plan for salvation was our learning to live and work together, even when we don’t agree. Even when our feelings get hurt because we aren’t thanked properly. Even when it looks like the church is going to hell in a hand basket,

and with a few minor adjustments (we are happy to suggest) the disaster could be averted. Paul thinks community is a faith practice—living, working, worshipping *together* even if you don't always *agree* with each other—an alternative lifestyle which is the primary mark of salvation. It's as radical a notion as John McCain's that Republicans and Democrats sit next to each other in order to properly hear the State of the Union address.

God's message since the beginning of time, through prophets and poets, psalmists and kings, is that salvation means the fulfillment of God's purpose. God's purpose has always been wholeness not homogeneity, unity not uniformity, diversity not division. All that warrior language today in Isaiah is not "might makes right." It isn't about winning or power. It's the story of God's People: the Servant known and called before birth, the Servant failing and then remembering God's promise of equipping for mission. This is a story of wilderness times for those called of God, times when the perceived absence of God calls everything into question, leaving one with a sense of failure. But this is where salvation comes: it's through that very failure God calls the Servant to a wider mission.

This week I met with the presbytery's task force on vital congregations. You may be aware that the Presbyterian church nationally is losing members. We are not alone in this phenomenon; all mainline denominations are dwindling, and it's not just churches—Rotary, Kiwanis, the Elks, Masons, the Grange are all declining. But despite shrinking numbers, there are pockets of vitality and growth. Presbytery wants to know more. Our task force is theologically and politically diverse—as individuals and in the types of congregations we represent. Our conversation was about the changing nature of church and its changing context. In a place where people regularly declare, "I'm spiritual but not religious," what is the relevance of what happens here on Sunday morning? How do we proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to a culture that believes "Christian" is a political weapon? How do we invite aging congregations to see "vital church" as more than babies in the nursery on Sunday morning?

The church today is not the church to which Paul wrote in Corinth. The context to which Isaiah's Servant was called is not like ours. And yet, the *meaning* of these passages remains. Even when we fail to meet God's expectations, if God calls, God also equips, God also redeems. God knows the world is changing. But God continues to call particular people to particular tasks. And continues to equip communities with people whose gifts are appropriate to the task. Right now, I believe our call is as particular as the one of which Paul reminded the church in Corinth—a call to proclaim an alternative way of life based on faith in Christ. Our invitation is to first proclaim that faith by *living* it. We embody our call when we are an alternative to the over-programmed, success-driven, consumer-oriented, power-hungry world we live in. We embody that call when we invite others to engage in that with us. We embody that call when we take risks and fail and go out again, trusting God to redeem even *our* failures.

[Return Home](#)