

Isaiah 42: 1-9 “Bruised Reeds & Smoldering Wicks” Rev. Janet Chapman 1/12/20

So in case you hadn't heard the University of Oregon football team won the Rose Bowl...again. But as much media hype as this team gets, thanks in part to the owner of Nike whose every whim seems to guide the flight path of the Ducks, I am far more interested in the lesser known stories out of U of O. Such as arose from a May, 2019 video where Keanon Lowe, former U of O & 49ers football player, intervened to prevent a school shooting in Portland. As security guard and track/field coach at Parkrose High School, he came face to face with 19 year old Angel Granados-Diaz holding a rifle, intending to kill himself. Lowe had the opportunity to diffuse the situation within a few seconds telling Angel he was there to save him, he was there for a reason, and that his life was worth living. Instead of slamming him to the ground as would be the natural instinct of any security guard, Lowe was able to take the rifle and embrace the young man who then broke down and sobbed in his arms. To me, that is the kind of courageous and compassionate action that deserves a trophy and a rose parade, far more than anything that happens on the field, but what do I know?

We don't know what precipitated Granados-Diaz reaching that point where he felt there was no reason to live anymore. He was, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, a bruised reed, a smoldering wick. These are people who have been stepped on by the world, by cruelty, abuse, exploitation, and prejudice. They don't need angry or judgmental words, but words to encourage them to keep growing, to keep reaching for the light. Sometimes they are people who just have a tiny glimmer of faith left, a small flame of hope trying to rekindle and burn brighter. These are folks who have an aching, a yearning, a seeking in the soul that is all they can muster. They don't need encounters which will snuff out whatever dim light still flickers within them, but they need words and actions that will feed that sputtering flame.

People who are bruised reeds and smoldering wicks need compassion and understanding, something which the prophet Isaiah sought to give his listeners with the words we hear today. He lays out a portrait of the kind of leadership we should expect from those who are called by God: patient, nonviolent, and merciful. Those chosen by God to lead do not “execute justice” by force or shame but instead seek to practice tender care, not just for vulnerable people but for vulnerable ideas and plans; for those suggestions still coming into fullness, for those small efforts struggling to plant their roots. True leadership protects what is weak until it is strong enough to stand, and seeks to keep gentle hands cupped around a weak flame until it can burn on its own. Such servant leadership is what Isaiah’s community desperately needs and we are no different in that way. For that community, they were deeply fractured – one part was living in exile along the banks of the Euphrates while another was barely scratching out a living in the homeland of Judah. Marauding armies, raiders, and vandals had plundered the land, leaving the residents with little to work with. Whether on the Euphrates or in Judah, the feeling of spiritual dislocation was pervasive. A foreign power had invaded what they considered sacred, not unlike a nation who has to wrestle with the ramifications of a foreign power invading an election and manipulating public opinion.

There was, there is, a shame of defeat when one has to admit being overrun by invaders that seek your demise in order to solidify their victory. What could be worse? For the Israelites, their God has seemingly been surrounded and bested by Marduk, Nebo, and the rest of the Babylonian pantheon. Probing and difficult questions were gaining currency – how does our God stack up against these other gods or today we would ask what does it matter that I choose to follow in Jesus’ path versus the path of material success? Why choose God over self?

What is the character of our God? Does God even have the power to protect us? Does God even care, and if so, how do we know that our God is with us? When questions like these spring from human experience, the time is ripe for God to raise up leaders, servants, to stand with the people in that space where a center used to be, to serve not just one's own people but to be a light to the nations as verse 6 says. This is the challenge the prophet faced – to restore a sense of a Center to bruised reeds and smoldering wicks who have been demoralized by life's circumstances. That sacred center, as we see in this text is heavily steeped in compassion.

A student once asked anthropologist Margaret Mead for the earliest sign of civilization in a given culture. He expected the answer to be a clay pot, perhaps a fish hook, or grinding stone. Her answer was "a healed femur." Mead explained that no mended bones are found where the law of the jungle, survival of the fittest, reigns. A healed femur shows that someone cared. Someone had to hunt and gather for that injured person until the leg healed. The evidence of compassion is the first sign of civilization. It is compassion for the other that prods God-called leaders to speak and act in confusing and dispiriting times, where expectations have been dashed, hopes called into question, and a sense of purpose has been rendered illusive. When bruised reeds and smoldering wicks long for a new infusion of optimism and intention, a clear idea that God still has a plan for us and for the universe, God calls out servants like you and me. Isaiah 42: 1 says, "Look at my servant! I cause him or her to stand up! My chosen one! I am delighted in them!" Then in verse 6, it says that God has taken the Servant "by the hand." This commissioning of leadership is the first of 4 unforgettable portraits, sometimes called Servant Songs (42: 1-4, 49: 1-6, 50: 4-9, & 52: 13 - 53: 12) , that Isaiah paints of the Servant of God which illustrate what God calls not just one but all to do. Whereas we Christians

often think these words point to Jesus Christ, the reality is that the identity of this servant is far less important than understanding Isaiah's words are considered a summation of God's will and way for any who would call themselves children of God. To dismiss the text as just about Moses, Jesus, a prophet or king is essentially a cop-out for those of us who seek to live by God's will and way.

Officer Tori Matthews of the Southern California Humane Society might think twice before accepting the title of servant of God but that is exactly who she was when she got an emergency call from a little boy about his pet iguana. It had been scared up a tree by a neighbor's dog and then fell from the tree into the swimming pool, where it sank like a brick. Officer Matthews came with her net and dived into the pool, emerging seconds later with the pet's limp body. She thought, "Well, you do CPR on a person and a dog, why not an iguana?" So she locked lips with the lizard. Looking back on it, she admitted it was a pretty ugly animal to be kissing, but the last thing she wanted to do was tell that little boy his iguana had died. Amazingly, the lizard responded and made a full recovery. Tori Matthews didn't see a waterlogged reptile that day; she saw a vulnerable little boy frightened of losing his beloved pet. With compassion, she fanned that flame of life back for both boy and pet.

Servant leadership is not always characterized by such grand actions. Often it is unobtrusive, quiet, and barely noticeable, yet it still offers much needed reconciliation to a fractured world. We see it when folks bring food to a family who will not leave the bedside of their dying mother; we experience it when friends show up in the cold, early hours on a Friday morning to feed hot meals to the homeless; we hear it when one offers a name to be prayed for in the community; we feel it when someone holds our hand or embraces us in a hug; we

witness it as folks regularly staff a thrift store so that funds can be raised to ensure ministry on a larger scale continues; we live it when we place the needs of others above our preferences and desires; we model it when we say yes to God despite our natural instinct to say no. And when you tend to believe that somehow God has gotten the wrong address, has chosen you by mistake, take note of what God says in chapter 49, in the next portrait of the 4 descriptions of the servant of God. Paraphrasing, God says, "Stop doing a job, start being a light. Stop doing your duty. Start being mine. Stop worrying about whether or not you have done a good job. Start leaving that up to me. You can't see it the way I can. You just let your light shine and let me take care of the rest. I chose you and I've got good taste. I made you and I can be trusted."

You have been chosen dear friends so that bruised reeds might be strengthened and comforted, so that smoldering wicks might be ignited and enlivened – let your light shine and let God take care of the rest!