### “Only Speak the Word” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Jan. 15, 2023

**Isaiah 49:3–6**

3 The Lord said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.” 4 But I said, “I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God.”

5 And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the Lord, and my God has become my strength— 6 he says, “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.”

**Matthew 8:5–13**

5 When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him 6and saying, “Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress.” 7And he said to him, “I will come and cure him.” 8The centurion answered, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. 9For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and the slave does it.” 10When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, “Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. 11I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, 12while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” 13And to the centurion Jesus said, “Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.” And the servant was healed in that hour.

Welcome, everyone, to First Church. I missed visiting with you all while I recovered. Your get-well messages were true sparks of joy for me and Karen. Well, life is often full of surprises. Some are wonderful, some not so good, and others can just make you stop and think. Jesus’ sermons often included surprises to his followers—he was attempting to bring the good news of God and God’s relationship to people who had not heard these words about a personal relationship with God. And these messages were often surprising, even life-changing for many. Today we hear of at least three surprising statements, one of which was the Roman centurion’s remark, which surprised even Jesus.

At first glance, Jesus’ reply, “Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith” (8:10) seems like an overreaction, and I’m calling it the second surprising statement here. What did the Roman centurion say that outshone anything any Israelite had said? I think if we look closely at the soldier’s saying, we see a remarkable insight. He says he believes Jesus can heal at a distance. Why? Well, he says, it’s like this: I give orders to one person under my authority and they are followed. I give orders to another person under me, and they are followed, too.

In other words, it is an orderly universe with persons in positions of authority. But the centurion also has an awareness of things *unseen*. He is saying to Jesus: I believe you are a person in a position of spiritual authority, whose orders will be followed. It’s an insight into the fact of a physically and spiritually orderly universe, and Jesus’ place in it, that is remarkable. Of course, we learn that, when the centurion returns home, his servant has been healed. Healing is often parallel to salvation, in the Jesus story.

It’s appropriate that it’s a Roman who has this insight about order, though it could, theoretically, have been expressed by a Jew or anyone else. But Jesus uses it as a teaching moment, and deliberately shocks his Jewish apostles by saying this. He also takes the occasion to point out that “many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (v. 11), while many descendants of Abraham, by their stubbornness, are going to leave themselves out in the dark. This is the third surprising statement. Jesus uses the occasion to reaffirm his teaching about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob being alive in the afterlife, and to promise a future Messianic banquet. And to make the Messianic banquet open to *Gentiles* would be an even further shock to his Jewish hearers. Most Jews at that time thought they were the “Chosen People,” and would be surprised to hear that God did not necessarily favor them.

Among the lessons for us to take from this passage is that national identity and heritage do not mean that one will inherit the promises. One needs to have one’s own personal insight into the truth; it will not be handed on to you like a piece of inherited property. Everyone will have their own personal experience of insight and trust, and that’s what you need, not a claim of hereditary rights. You need to stake your own claim, to develop your own insight through experience, not thru inheritance. And it is available to all nationalities. No single group is favored.

Maybe that openness to all nationalities seems obvious to us today, but it was not obvious in either Jesus’ day or Isaiah’s. The Isaiah passage is a remarkable message to the prophet. It’s not enough “that you should . . . raise up the tribes of Jacob and 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” (49:6). God, through the prophet, is saying “I want the message of salvation to reach the Gentiles, and you are my spokesperson.” It’s a message first of all to the prophet, but also from the prophet to the Jewish people. You are to carry the message to all the world.

Today we see that the Christian movement, more than Judaism, has inherited that mission and taken it on, starting out with Paul’s and Peter’s and Philip’s message to the Gentiles, and continuing through missionary efforts ever since.

You and I may not be missionaries, but we are like ambassadors of Christ. We represent Christ in our daily lives. We should trust his spiritual overcare and authority, like the Roman centurion did. If we do trust him, then we can be effective ambassadors, showing forth the kingdom in our character, in our giving, and in our acts. We need to trust in his trustworthiness and overcare.

We can’t fake trust. We have to pray for more trust, and grow into it as it is given to us. We reach the state where we can say to Jesus, “only speak the word, and it will be done.” We will also learn this faithful trusting through practice, through an actual deepening of our faith through life experience. You can always say a simple prayer, “Jesus, help me to know you better and trust you more deeply. Reach me in my life and touch my heart.” Such a prayer can never go unanswered. Trust Jesus and work on deepening your relationship with him.

Know that you have already received the gift of God’s love, and possess that inner guide that lightens your path. Let your inner light shine outward and be ready for amazing surprises.