

Sermon at South Carolina Convention

11/14/14

Isaiah 49:5-13

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 28:16-20

Talk about mission has become the in-thing these days. Some think that it is a new fad and will go away. Others think it is a diversionary tactic to avoid the real issues. Is it?

I thought this was in our DNA as Christians and for Episcopalians it's actually in your very being. As a registered entity your national church is "**the Domestic and Foreign Mission Society**"! God is a God in and of mission and the church is an agent in that mission. As Wayne Schwab in his study, *When the Members are the Missionaries*, puts it, "the mission has a church"! and we are that church.

What happens when things do not work or do not work out? More often than not, we go to plan B. God's people, Israel, have become desperate if not completely despondent about their future. Exile has taken forever. God does not seem to be on their side. At the same time God is frustrated with them. They are his chosen people and they have a responsibility to be his servant to all the world. On that score they have failed miserably hence their exile. As is God's nature he does not give up on them. In his plan he raises up a servant (an individual) not only to revive his people Israel for the purpose for which he created them but also for the whole world, "the ends of the earth".

As a Communion we find ourselves in a similar place today. What happens when the collective has lost its way? God has a plan B! "Whom shall I send, Who will go for us?" remains God's question. You may recall this from Isaiah 6. The prophet on that occasion says: "Here I am. Send me".

In Jeremiah we find something similar to our passage today when God says he chose him before he was born. Ezekiel is also given a task in a similar way. V3 of our Isaiah lesson says, "You are my servant - you are Israel, in whom I will be glorified." These words have a familiar ring to them, don't they? They are almost verbatim the words by God at Jesus baptism and also at the Transfiguration! Today's Gospel just falls short of saying the same words, as Jesus gives the charge to the disciples to Go! They are a chosen bunch just like this servant in Isaiah is a chosen one. A special one. There is some kind of destiny enunciated here. The servant was destined for it. Kind of an Esther moment - Remember Esther who is reminded by her uncle that "it is for times like this that she was chosen"?

Israel has lost its way. Israel is in the diaspora. Israel has lost the plot. God desires their restoration. In their restoration is the restoration of the world.

The servant takes this destiny as an honor for in verse 5 and 6 he says:

“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.”
(Isaiah 49)

It does not get any clearer than that, does it? The servant is destined for this task. In fact there is a hint of blackmail. I usually call this Godmail. You are nabbed and pinned in a corner and do not have much of a choice. As Saint Paul would put it, one is "constrained by the the love of Christ". In our Epistle, St Paul illustrates this constraint by saying that it is the very reason why he is in prison! Of course in this case it is the consequences of that obedience.

We all know how he was zapped into this ministry, don't we? God was actually very direct with him: "Why are you kicking against the pricks?" God asked him. Once marked you have no choice. You can kick against the pricks all you want! You either do or die. "Ouch!" you may say.

Just to bring it close to home, do you remember what was said to you at baptism? In the midst of all those other words one

pronouncement on you should stand out. It is "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever." You are marked. You become a person of interest to God. Yes, just like the television series! Nowhere to hide.

As we noticed earlier, the scope of the mission is not just Israel but the ends of the earth. Very similar words to the ones Jesus uses as he gives the disciples a charge to Go, in the Gospel we read.

In Mission studies there is a concept known as *Manifest Destiny*. It states that the reason behind the mission activity of the church in Europe and the USA in the 19th century was that these countries felt that due to their development progress and the resources they had, they were destined to "save" the world. That they were so endowed was not by accident but that God intended it that way for mission's sake. Of course this is fraught with all sorts of complexes, hegemonic and homogenizing tendencies. In fact the impression that all mission work during that time was linked to colonial expansion comes from one interpretation of this concept. No doubt God endows people with gifts and other goods for a purpose. It would be wrong to be hung up on the complex that arises from this concept and ignore the fact that there is truth in that some (if not all) of us are destined for mission. Doesn't the Bible say that all gifts are for the edification of the body of Christ? Notwithstanding the fraughtness of this concept I would like to suggest that, as the Isaiah reading says, the servant of the Lord is so destined and that that servant is you!

It is therefore not a matter of choice (whatever the reasons for the choice) for the Episcopal Church, the Diocese of South Carolina or any other part of the body of Christ to talk about and engage in Mission. In fact, what I am suggesting is that everyone (each one individually) of us here is destined for mission. What form that takes is another story but the matter is that you are destined for Mission. God in his design has called you and marked you and thus sealed you for this purpose. You have no choice in the matter!

The fascinating thing about the servant of the Lord, if we go back to the first of the Servant Songs in Isaiah 42 is that his disposition is that of a learner. As Isaiah puts it. He is one that is woken up every morning to hear from and thus learn from God. So if you ask me what your particular mission is, I refer you to this servant stance. Attentive listening to God's bidding. If one does not do that one is in danger of actually doing the right thing wrongly! And God does not take kindly to that.

Jeremiah 28 gives an apt narrative warning about those who would go without having been sent by God. Those who would dare speak in God's name without his sanction. God says he has no pleasure in them.

I find this fascinating in the light of having just said that all are destined to go. The thing to note in the Jeremiah account of these prophets is that they were true prophets, recognized as such by all. So we are not talking about imposters here. What happens in the story is that they become a little presumptuous about their prophetic calling and authority. They cease to listen to God. In fact

they are too excited about God's impending salvific act that they presume to give it their own timetable. For all intents and purposes they are doing what they are supposed to be doing except that this time they got the timing wrong as they did not listen to God. Jeremiah is the one that has taken the time and gives a different timing. For this they ridicule him. But he was right! Being a prophet does not give one license to presume to know God's plans without learning from God.

The same goes for mission. We can all get excited about this calling and our place in God's mission. We can all be excited that finally the Episcopal Church and indeed our diocese, has woken up to its destiny but unless God makes the pronouncement "This is my child in whom I am well pleased Listen to him! or this is my servant...!" our excitement can be in vain. This calls for what in Spirituality is called the practice of the presence of God. How in tune with God and God's designs are we?

To be the servant as portrayed in Isaiah and to be the servant after Jesus Christ example is to be in constant touch or rather in complete reliance on and in unity with God as one participates and engages in mission. In fact Jesus, as Evangelist John reminds us, says that without him we can do nothing. Remember the vine analogy and the unity of the Father and the Son and that of the Son with the disciples which in turn is the unity of the disciples to the father! This is more than synergy! Its participation in God as God does his business!

This is also what the final line in the great Commission implies when Jesus Christ says "Behold, I am with you to the end of the age". Very suggestive of a continued presence and thus reliance of the disciples on that presence in the accomplishment of the charge given to them. Presumption would suggest taking God for granted, taking the task too lightly. This is what the servant is warned against. Listen to v6 of Is. 49, "Is it 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."

As you can tell from this, it is easy to get carried away having heard the call and forget to be attentive to the Lord's bidding in it. It is easy to make it your mission. Yes, to make it all about you! Too action oriented or shall I say too agenda oriented that one has not taken time to hear what agenda God has for his people.

Manifest Destiny on our part is not license to do what we want, the way we want but to do what God wants; the way God wants. Is this why it is that sometimes when we get into it and do the right thing we get a reaction that puzzles us? Isn't this too familiar for American ears? Some of you may wonder what I am suggesting here. Let me indulge your curiosity a little.

Have you not heard some quarters of the Anglican Communion on the other side of the Atlantic (and this side too) suggesting that the Episcopal Church is talking mission as a diversionary tactic from dealing with " Gospel issues"? In the secular world where America (as the USA sees itself) lives this *Manifest Destiny* for all to see,

have Americans not been baffled by the hate and distrust the world feels in spite of all the good intentions of the US foreign policy and all the good deeds performed on behalf of the poor through state organs, the church and other humanitarian organizations? It may be because of the world's blindness and deafness to the thunderous affirmation by God of these activities. But may I suggest that it may be that you are doing the right thing or think you are doing the right thing in the same way that the prophets in Jeremiah 28 referred to above did. Is it not time to take seriously the servant attitude that Isaiah expounded in Isaiah 42? The Psalmist puts the challenge differently. He says "unless the Lord builds the house the builders build in vain and unless the Lord watches over the house the watchman watch in vain." This in no way questions your *Manifest Destiny* as the ones sealed as God's own but it is a call to be the servant whose attitude is to be in tune with God as opposed to doing good for its own sake or as a fad or even as a self identified and self imposed duty.

The other commissioning we read about in the Bible is in Acts 1. The disciples already knew that they had work to do for Christ. They may have had some fear and trepidation (as we all know) but they were obedient to the one who told them that it will be only when the Holy Spirit, the promised one has come upon them that they will be witnesses everywhere.

So what I am asking is this: "As you have heard the bidding of God to join him in his mission, have you sought out what it is he is actually sending you out to do and say?" The fact that we have been called does not mean we know the contents of the operation

we are called to. Unless we sit in God's presence and seek his face we may do the right thing the wrong way. If indeed we know that (as the prophet said) "it is not a light thing" that God has called us to, we have no choice but to seek his presence with us. I am talking about the kind of attitude Moses had when he had led the Israelites out of Egypt (Ex 33). Do you the remember the part of the Exodus when Moses seeks God's assurance and says something to the effect that, "If you will not go with us we are not leaving here"? Let me read it to you:

“12 Moses said to the LORD, “See, you have said to me, ‘Bring up this people’; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’ 13 Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.” 14 He said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” 15 And he said to him, “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. 16 For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.”

17 The LORD said to Moses, “I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.”

This regrouping is paramount if we are to engage in mission. It is imperative if we are not to get it all wrong even as we have been

called. What I am saying is that I believe you have heard God right and its time to check in with him in order for you to get the details of his plan. Need I say more?

Now is the time.

Now is the moment to affirm this.

You heard right!

The challenge now is to live into this calling in God's mission knowing like Paul that "this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, 9 and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; 10 so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places." (Eph 3). That is your destiny for which Christ has gotten hold of you.

Let those who have ears hear God's word!