

“If Only... Hopeful Imagination”

Stewardship Sermon Series for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, October 30, 2011

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Isaiah 49:1-7

The Servant’s Mission

Isaiah 49

Listen to me, O coastlands,

pay attention, you peoples from far away!

The Lord called me before I was born,

while I was in my mother’s womb he named me.

2 He made my mouth like a sharp sword,

in the shadow of his hand he hid me;

he made me a polished arrow,

in his quiver he hid me away.

3 And he 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.”

7 Thus says the Lord,

 the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One,
to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations,
 the slave of rulers,
“Kings shall see and stand up,
 princes, and they shall prostrate themselves,
because of the Lord, who is faithful,
 the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”

Sermon

***The Lord said, “I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”***

Today we are richly blessed to begin together our journey of faith
through a four-week church worship and sermon series on “*If
Only...*”

We know the “if only” moments and memories of our lives.

If only...

Floating before our eyes and across our minds are the regrets, the fears, the
anxieties.

If only...

Living in and with a painful past or challenging experiences
can hinder forward movement and inhibit growth.

There is probably nothing more debilitating
than negativity and constant defeat,
compounding themselves into fearful living.

And so we barely live,

barely breathe,

barely stretch our limbs or step off our branches or take risks.

And so we are hounded by our fears,

fear of failure,

fear of flying and soaring above, closer to the Son of God,

fearful of our glory, our lightness of being,

our capacity for love,

insecure and unsure of our
spiritual strength

to bear burdens and carry
the weight

of one another's
needs and hopes.

If only...

When you start with fear,

when your opening thought is filled with anxiety, with tension and turmoil,

then the *if only* statements of your soul are sure to reflect that.

However, what happens when you start from a place of love,

when you begin from a source of hope and confidence,

when you tap into a Creator

whose will is build up what is good and to tear
down what is evil?

Suddenly the “if only” statements of our lives take on a brighter outlook on life.

Suddenly there is pep in our step and our eyes are on the prize

because we know we have always been the apple of God’s eyes.

If only you and I would live into whatever God dreams for us

knowing and trusting that God will not let us fail!

If only we would open our souls and minds

to envision and live into the vision

that God has already imagined and dreamed!

If only we would learn to believe and live into our faith

as Isaiah did when the Lord said to him:

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.”*

Walter Brueggemann reflected on God giving us as a light to the nations and said,

“You carry the dreams of God in your daring bodies.”

One day the late Billy Graham was on an airplane

and a gentleman in the seat in front of him had had one drink too many.

When the flight attendant tried to quiet him down she said,

“Did you know that the Reverend Billy Graham is sitting right behind you?”

The rowdy passenger turned around and said,

“Billy Graham, I went to one of your revivals and it changed my life!”

They say that a dream of God came true. They say it happened like this:

A Sunday School teacher named Mr. Kimball in 1858,

led a Boston shoe clerk to give his life to Christ.

The shoe clerk, Dwight L. Moody, became an evangelist.

In England in 1879, Dwight Moody awakened evangelistic zeal

in the heart of Frederick B. Meyer, pastor of a small congregation.

Meyer, preaching to young people on an American college campus,

brought to Christ a student named J. Wilbur Chapman.

Chapman, engaged in YMCA work,

employed a former baseball player named Billy Sunday to do evangelistic work.

Billy Sunday, it is said, held a revival in Charlotte, North Carolina.

A group of local men and women were so enthusiastic afterward

that they planned another Christian campaign,

and brought to Charlotte a preacher named Mordecai Hamm.

During Mordecai Hamm's revival, a young man named Billy Graham

heard the gospel and gave his life to Jesus Christ.

Over 153 years ago,

one Sunday School teacher named Mr. Kimball invested his life in Christ,

and shared the love of God with a shoe clerk.

One faithful Christian believed he had the power of the Holy Spirit

because he was foolish enough to believe that God said he did.

One disciple of Christ wasn't concerned about what others thought of him,

about being cool,

appearing socially acceptable,

quietly fitting in with the mainstream;

instead one follower of Jesus had the crazy notion

that he should live out his faith with such integrity and joy
and hope

that someone else might see his witness

and follow, not himself, but the Son of
God.

One by one by one people of faith have touched millions.

One by one by one people of faith have dared to take risks,

to dream dreams and live out God's vision,

to share their faith in such a way that all they do and say
points to God.

We bear the dreams of God in our hearts and minds and souls and strength.

In 1858, there was no way for Mr. Kimball to know that the torch he lit

when he shared his faith would one day grow to be a light to the
nations.

This is the mystery and magic of faith;

this is the breadth and depth of the cross and the crown;

this is the power and the promise of God.

We are a part of something mightier than we,

kingdom builders of the kingdom of God;

yet each one of us here is significant, unique and special;

every single one of us here is needed, prayed for, and appreciated;

you are an all-important part of a whole

that is greater than the sum of its parts.

God has a dream.

God has a dream of a people living lives of servanthood,

one where our primary concern

is not to satisfy ourselves but to serve one another.

We fall into our own traps

whenever we attempt to limit the scope, range and magnitude

of what God desires and anticipates;

we miss the forest for the trees

when we seek to manage and limit

what God can and does create through the church
of Jesus Christ.

It is no small thing, this dream of God.

The prophet Isaiah wrote that the Lord says,

“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant

to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel;

I will give you as a light to the nations,

that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”

This is not Isaiah’s idea;

the only authority Isaiah brings to the conversation is that this is not his idea.

As Walter Brueggemann says, Isaiah speaks with authority because

“...the initiative of the mission is with God, and only with God.”

God initiates mission.

God begins the service of the church;

the Spirit of God dreams and envisions

who and how and when we are to serve,

and then gives birth to the mission of the whole people of God.

The One who called us into being

has the power and authority and will to create in us as well

our desire to serve and the will to carry out God’s plan for the church.

The only thing holding us back, holding up and hindering the church,

holding back the fulfillment of God’s will is our fear.

You know, my Aunt Ginny collects pop-up books.

One book in her collection emphasizes people's fears.

Open the book and you are standing at a lectern in front of a church.

Turn the page and snakes leap out to the reader;

turn the page and you are atop a tall building looking down;

turn the page and you are in a packed elevator;

turn the page and you are sitting in a dentist's chair looking up at a light;

turn the page and you are six feet down in a grave looking up.

Pretty scary; it's frightening to pick up a cute little pop-up book

and come face to face with one's fears.

Of course, her book needed one more page,

one more pop-up to spring out and confront us with our greatest fear.

We fear our glory.

At his 1994 inauguration speech, Nelson Mandela quoted Marianne Williamson:

"Our greatest fear is not that we are inadequate,

but that we are powerful beyond measure.

It is our light, not our darkness that frightens us.

We ask ourselves,

Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, handsome, talented and fabulous?

Actually, who are you not to be?

You are a child of God.

Your playing small does not serve the world.

There is nothing enlightened about shrinking

so that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We were born to make manifest the glory of God within us.

It is not just in some; it is in everyone.

And, as we let our own light shine,

we consciously give other people permission to do the same.

As we are liberated from our fear,

our presence automatically liberates others."

In his book Waking the Dead, John Eldredge

also speaks of our fear that we are powerful beyond measure;

he describes it as fearing our own glory as beings made in the image of God.

"We do fear our glory." Eldredge writes,

"The...reason we fear our own glory is that once we let others see it,

they will have seen the truest us, and that is nakedness indeed.

We can repent of our sin. We can work on our "issues."

But there is nothing to be done about our glory.

It is an awkward thing to shimmer

when everyone else around you is not,

*to walk in your glory with an unveiled face
when everyone else is veiling his [or her] face.
“And that is why living from your glory is the only loving thing to do.*

You cannot love another person from a false self.

You cannot love another while you are still hiding.

How can you help them to freedom while you remain captive?”

(John Eldredge. Waking the Dead. Page 87-88)

We carry the dreams of God in our daring bodies.

Will you dare to live out and share these dreams?

Will you embody these aspirations for tomorrow?

Will you listen and repeat God’s word for today?

Will you hold near and dear to your heart

the memories of God’s activity in your past,

remembrances that inform your present

and give hope for the future?

At 87, the philosopher George Herbert Planner

concluded a brief autobiographical statement with:

“As I see these things rising behind me

they do not seem of my doing.

Some greater power than I

has been using me as its glad instrument.”

Some greater power than you and me has a dream for us.

Some greater power than you and me has a fantastic use for us.

The mission of God is not our idea;

it is not born of us,

but by the grace of God it must and shall emerge through
us.

Some greater power than you and me has a dream for us.

Some greater power called Jesus Christ,

given as a gift of servanthood to the world,

to be a light to the nations,

calls us forth to carry on the mighty works of God,

one act of kindness at a time, one act of justice, of
compassion,

one act of hospitality at a time.

May the Christian service we dare to embrace and embody

be the expression and fulfillment of God's dreams that we carry
within.

I charge you -- no, we are charged! --

we are charged and inspired by all those who have gone on before
us --

those who taught us to pray, to be and share the Good
News,

those who cared for us so much

they gave us the greatest gift of all, Jesus
Christ

-- we are charged to take on the conscience of the entire world.

We are not given a small thing to do;

we are commissioned to be a light to all the nations.

Oh, would that God asked us to accept a smaller assignment!

Would that God said to the church,

“Just take care of your own.”

“Love only those who love you.”

“Look out for those who look like you.”

“Be builders of self-esteem only,

*not builders of a just
society.”*

*“Hakuna
matata.”*

Instead, instead, instead the Good News of Jesus Christ is that

we are called to a vaster understanding of community service

and of what it means to live lives of grace and servanthood.

Will we choose to let out the dreams of God?

Do you dare to put your body and life and breath and resources on the line?

Do so, and you will live!

Do so, and you risk all -- but you gain your soul!

Will Wilimon was the visiting speaker at the Lenten Sermon Series in Memphis.

He spoke at an Episcopal Church in the downtown area.

Afterward everyone was invited to stay and visit in the fellowship hall,
where soup and sandwiches would be served for a couple of dollars.

Will Wilimon and the priest of the Episcopal congregation
went downstairs to the fellowship hall.

Wilimon looked around and saw people coming into the room
from other rooms in the church building;

they had been involved in a wide range of programs and
ministries there.

Some people were active in giving food and clothing to homeless families;
some were destitute;

some folks were walking in after meeting

with Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics
Anonymous;

still others were coming in off the street to visit and eat with their friends.

Everyone sat at tables and ate their soup and sandwiches together.

Wilimon took this all in as he looked around.

He turned to the priest by his side

and said, *“This is a good idea you have here.”*

“Oh, no,” replied the priest, *“this isn’t my idea. This is Jesus’ idea.”*

If only Jesus would give you and me and all of us as a light to the nations

that His salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

What an idea! What a dream!

Can you imagine that?

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen