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Isaiah 42:1-4

1st Message

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# THE FIRST SERVANT SONG: LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL

SERIES: *GREAT EXPECTATIONS*

## Dashed Expectations (Luke 24:13-24)

In the final chapter of his gospel, Luke tells the story of a couple walking the seven mile road from Jerusalem to Emmaus, deep in conversation, trying to make sense of the events of the past few days – Jesus’s crucifixion, burial and resurrection. Luke records,

While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus appeared to them and walked with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And Jesus said to them, “What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?” And they stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?” And he said to them, “What things?” And they said to him, “Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” (Luke 24:15-21 ESV)

Like all devout Jews, Cleopas<sup>1</sup> and his wife had great expectations from the prophets. They were anxiously waiting for a New Exodus that would liberate Israel from pagan domination, so that she would be free to serve and worship God in peace and holiness. If Jesus was the one to lead this exodus and redeem Israel, he should have conquered Rome in power, like Moses did Pharaoh, rather than die on a Roman cross.

## Renewed Expectations (Luke 24:25-32)

But Jesus said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. (vs. 25-27)

Luke records that Cleopas and his wife urged him to spend the day with them, and as Jesus served them communion, stretching out his hands to bless and break the bread,

Their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” (Luke 24:31-32).

So sad hearts become burning hearts. The story illustrates what is common to all of us who follow Jesus. As we begin our journey, the promises of Scripture fan the flame of our expectations and give us high hopes of what lies ahead. But for many of us, it doesn’t take long before reality snuffs out the light of our hope. Like Cleopas and his wife we become sad, unable to recognize Jesus at work in our world. What we need is the Spirit of Jesus to open our eyes and give us a new lens to unlock the mysteries of life found in Scripture, to warm

our hearts not only with the truth itself, but with the very presence of Jesus.

As we look ahead to celebrating Advent and the incarnation of Christ, I thought it appropriate for us to examine Isaiah’s Servant Songs (I’ve entitled the series *Great Expectations*). These texts were designed to fuel Israel’s hopes and dreams during the dark days of her exile, when her temple was destroyed, her land overrun by pagan nations and her people languishing under the torment of idolatrous Babylon. How long would it continue? Did Israel have a future? Would God vindicate his people? Or, would she be forever lost and relegated to lie in the dust of broken dreams? Out of these ashes come the words of Isaiah. There is a bright future for God’s people. It lies with the one who takes on Israel’s role as his servant to do for the nation and world what Israel failed to do. The servant’s life and ministry are poetically displayed in four songs (Isaiah 42:1-13; 49:1-9; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12), each building in exquisite beauty and intensity. These were crucial texts for Jesus in terms of his own self-understanding and his mission.

This, the first of four songs, I’ve entitled *Liberty and Justice for All*.

Behold my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my Spirit upon him;  
he will bring forth justice to the nations.  
He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice,  
or make it heard in the street;  
a bruised reed he will not break,  
and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;  
he will faithfully bring forth justice.  
He will not grow faint or be discouraged  
till he has established justice in the earth;  
and the coastlands wait for his law. (Isa 42:1-4)

We can see the theme very clearly in this text: it is *mishpat*, justice. There are three divisions to this poem, which I’ve labeled the *Instrument* of Justice, the *Way* of Justice and the *Perfection* of Justice.

### I. The Instrument of Justice: The Servant (Isaiah 42:1)

Behold my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my Spirit upon him;  
he will bring forth justice to the nations.

In this text God places his servant center stage and showcases him (*ben*—“behold,” “see”) before the nation as the one he has commissioned with the daunting task of setting the world right. “My servant” is the title of highest accolade in the Old Testament and given to just a few, select individuals – Abraham, Moses, Caleb, David and Job. It speaks of an individual who not only is set apart and chosen by God to be an instrument to further his kingdom on earth, but also serves the interests of God with his whole heart.

As to the servant's credentials, he is supported, chosen, approved, and divinely empowered by God himself. He will not function in his own strength or carry out his own agenda. Thus God finds his deepest satisfaction in him. God's commitment to the servant and his divine enablement guarantees the success of his mission.

Eugene Peterson captures the force of God's commitment in the Message:

**“Take a good look at my servant.  
I’m backing him to the hilt.  
He’s the one I chose,  
and I couldn’t be more pleased with him.  
I’ve bathed him with my Spirit, my life.  
He’ll set everything right among the nations.”**  
(Isa 42:1 The Message)

For the Jews exiled in Babylon this announcement was dual-edged. On the one hand, the fact that God was finally going to act decisively to address the injustices in the world elicits shouts of joy from suffering exiles who long for home. Such an announcement would have ignited memories of the Exodus, when God's strong hand crushed proud Pharaoh and his idols with plagues of judgment and liberated his people from centuries of bondage and oppression.

But, to the discerning ear, the announcement also raises doubts as to Israel's future role in the kingdom, for the language Isaiah uses to describe “the servant” is identical to Israel's vocation and privileged relationship she had with God.

**But you, Israel, my servant,  
Jacob, whom I have chosen,  
the offspring of Abraham, my friend;  
you whom I *taken hold of* from the ends of the earth,  
and called from its farthest corners,  
saying to you, “You are my servant,  
I have *chosen* you and not cast you off;”  
fear not, for I am with you;  
be not dismayed, for I am your God;  
I will strengthen you, I will help you,  
I will *uphold* you with my righteous right hand. (41:8-10)**

For another “servant” to be invited to Israel's stage is like being told everything you trained your whole life for and dreamed about is going to come true, but it is going to happen through somebody else. After the company announcement you are left speculating what role, if any, will you play. Perhaps a more painful but accurate analogy would be that of marriage, as if the Lord was announcing that he is bringing a new bride into his chamber who shall be to him everything he once called you to be. Good news for the world, but what about you?

The exiles had an acute awareness that for centuries Israel had failed her calling. Instead of becoming a beacon of light to the nations, she became as blind and deaf as the idols she worshipped among the pagan nations (Isa 42:19). After 1500 years of salvation history she ends up in the idolatrous capital of the world, Babylon, not far from where God first called Abraham. No progress in 1500 years. Will God abandon his people there? No, God is faithful and compassionate beyond measure and keeps the door open to any who will admit their blindness (Isa 50:10). If God's people will repent of their idolatry and follow the servant and especially his *way* of being Israel, he says,

**And I will lead the blind  
in a way that they do not know,  
in paths that they have not known**

**I will guide them.**

**I will turn the darkness before them into light,  
the rough places into level ground.**

**These are the things I do,  
and I do not forsake them. (42:16)**

It is no accident that centuries later Jesus will miraculously heal many blind people. It is symbolic of the healing that must come to Israel as a nation. So the announcement brings joy coupled with the weighty and inescapable responsibility to completely rethink what it means to serve God's purposes. This is the kind of repentance John the Baptist was calling the nation to in the wilderness of Judah. He was preparing the way for the one coming after him, who would baptize them with the Holy Spirit, and thus he was redefining what it means to be God's people – no longer was it defined by national heritage or circumcision, but by being related to Jesus. At his baptism, God reconfirmed his choice of the Servant.

**And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:10-11).**

Given the decisive and historic mission the servant is called to, it seems odd that he remains anonymous. It makes us wonder whether anonymity is one of the great strategies of God's kingdom. We all want a name. We all want to be known. But do we have more power and influence when we are anonymous? By contrast, we know all too well the damage that occurs to God's name when Christians use the public stage to brazenly proclaim their faith – whether it's politicians, athletes, or participants on “Survivor” – and then behave in a way that is utterly despicable to Jesus.

In this text the servant's anonymity invites curiosity and draws Israel into the poem, forcing them to focus not on his identity but on his method – the *means* by which his purpose will be achieved. To describe *how* the servant brings forth justice on the earth, the poet uses the Hebrew word *lo'* (“not”) seven times in three verses (vv. 2-4). This perfect set of negatives alerts us to the fact that the *way* the servant functions is utterly opposite to anything we would expect, shockingly so.

## II. The Implementation of Justice (Isaiah 42:2-3)

**He will not cry out nor lift up [his voice],  
and he will not make his voice heard in the street;  
a crushed reed he will not break,  
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;  
he will faithfully bring forth justice.**

(vv. 2-3 adapted from the ESV)

### A. He will not seek his own justice (v. 2)

The verb “cry out” is often used as an anguished cry for help to be delivered from injustice and oppression. It was most memorably found on the lips of Israel when she cried out in anguish under the Egyptians at her birth (Exod 3:7, 9; 14:10, 15; Num 20:16; Deut 26:7) and is now re-awakened in her exile (Lam 2:18). The servant to come will not be immune to such suffering, but unlike Israel, he will not cry out or make his voice heard in the streets because, to our utter amazement, he will not seek his own justice or clamor for his own rights. Instead of resisting, fleeing or combating oppression with more oppression, “in quietness, humility and simplicity he will take all of the evil into himself and return only grace. That is power.”<sup>2</sup>

**He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,  
yet he opened not his mouth;  
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,  
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,  
so he opened not his mouth. (Isa 53:7)**

I'm amazed at how quiet God is when we grieve him. He never screams at us. This week I fell off my bike twice, and it wasn't glamorous. The first time I was with a group of pastors and I wanted to be in the lead because I knew the way to go. So I got on my bike and immediately I fell over in the gravel before we even started. God said, "You want to lead?" The second time I was coming home after a long ride, and as I was looking around taking in the beauty, I took my eyes off the road and promptly hit a curb and fell over into the rocks, bruising myself. Living with the bruises and pain this week has been a good thing, reminding me that when I take my eyes off the Lord it grieves him. But I am most often unaware of his grief because although he never stops forgiving me, I have wounded him nonetheless.

The first thing these verses tell us about justice is that we cannot begin to be servants of the kingdom if we are consumed with being vindicated for the wrongs done to us. You always have a choice when you are wronged: you can forgive or you can take it to court. And you may win in court – win the battle – but you are going to lose the war for the kingdom. My wife and I have been through a number of estate settlements and I've been executor 5 or 6 times, and in one of them we were wronged by an individual who wrote several thousand dollars worth of bad checks. I had the checks, the evidence of the wrongs done to us, and Emily and I asked ourselves what we should do. Emily said, "Let's let it go and walk away." The decision brought us a freedom that protected us from being consumed with getting what was rightfully ours.

#### **B. Justice from the bottom up, one person at a time**

Rather than angrily protesting for his own rights, the servant will use his oppression to bring salvation to others, especially the marginalized poor and needy. The two metaphors of a bruised reed and dimly burning wick beautifully depict those who have almost lost their spiritual resources of faith and hope. A bruised (or "crushed") reed speaks of the oppressive burdens that crush the spirit of the weak. The dimly burning wick is reminiscent of the early days of Samuel, when the light of the temple was almost extinguished through the sexually and morally abusive practices of the priesthood. God rekindled the dying flame through the ministry of the boy Samuel, who faithfully dispensed God's word of truth and light.

The servant's task of worldwide justice will be planted and take root in individuals who do not even register on the world's radar. It is the kid who is picked last to play on a sports team, the teenager who is made fun of because of his or her weight, the young woman who is the bridesmaid at every wedding, the student who fights with dyslexia and can't make the grade, the mother who is oppressed with depression, my friend Jimmy who is confined to a wheel chair, the overqualified engineer who can't find a job because of his age, or a daughter forced to grow up in a culture that prefers to abort them.

Considering the enormity of Jesus' task, you can't help but be struck reading the gospels how inefficient Jesus was with his time. Without the eye of faith one would think that he spends his few precious years of ministry engaged with endless interruptions by people of no influence. Once they capture his attention, he becomes so empathetic to their plight, it is as if they were the only thing that matters in the universe. And then, with a tender touch and a com-

manding word, he frees them from their bondage and restores them to the community of faith. These ill-timed intrusions often surprise and even exasperate his followers and on many occasions are an embarrassment – even an insult – to the religious leaders, who feel holy boundaries are being violated.

On one occasion while teaching in a synagogue, Jesus saw a crippled woman who had a disabling spirit for eighteen years that caused her to be doubled over so that she could not straighten up. As a visitor, Jesus broke with protocol and immediately laid hands on her and without a word healed her, freeing her from her affliction. When the ruler of synagogue objected that Jesus' healing work was a violation of the Sabbath laws, Jesus shot back,

**"You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to water it? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?" As he said these things, all his adversaries were put to shame, and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him. (Luke 13:15-16)**

The woman, a daughter of Abraham who has been bound by Satan for 18 years is immediately freed from bondage, symbolic of what Jesus longs to do for Israel. Yet Israel's leaders are keeping the nation bound by rules that were preventing them from the freedom Jesus was there to give. In the face of such major resistance, Jesus' efforts seem meager at best. What can the healing of one anonymous woman achieve? Luke answers the question decisively:

**"What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches." And again he said, "To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened." (Luke 13:11-32)**

What is the kingdom like? It is like a mustard seed, the smallest seed that produces a tree large enough to accommodate all the birds of the sky. It is like leaven, invisible to the naked eye, but soon permeates the whole loaf. As Tom Wright observes, "One healing of one woman – but every time you break the satanic chains that have tied people up, another victory is won which will go on having repercussions."<sup>3</sup> This is how things are set right in the kingdom of God: from the bottom up, one person at a time. Good news for us, when we are overwhelmed with all that is wrong in the world.

From our announcement this morning about Operation Christmas Child, you may wonder what one Christmas shoebox could possibly mean for a child living in poverty halfway around the world. Well, I know someone who received one. My dear friend Nerses Balabanian who was a pastor in Lebanon for 20 years and now serves a church in San Francisco, has a daughter who goes to the University of Santa Barbara. During Lebanon's civil war she was in elementary school, and she received a shoebox filled to the brim with gifts of toys and treats. To this day, more than a decade later, she still has her box. She took it to college to get all the other college students to make shoeboxes.

Our world, especially here in the Silicon Valley, is totally bound up. One of the places here where we see the burden of oppression and bondage so acutely is our school system. Our teenagers live under so many oppressive rules and so much pressure to perform – from teachers, coaches and parents – they are "bent over." One of my friends is

a high school teacher and during an exam he noticed one of his students was sleeping. He gently put his hand on her shoulder and she jerked awake and instantly started apologizing. Rather than rebuking her, rather than adding to her load, he took her test and told her to go back to sleep, assuring her she could make up the test later. The next day she explained to him with tears in her eyes that her father was in Iraq, that there was a lot of pressure at home and she had been up half the night before attending to other responsibilities. This one teacher's decision to lighten one student's burden had meant everything in the world to this girl. He didn't crush the bruised reed.

We also see the burden of oppression sinisterly masked in the high tech companies that dominate the Bay Area. I cringe for you software engineers who have creative skills to imitate the mind of God, but you labor under the dictates of bosses for whom your work is never good enough, never fast enough. But even so, despite these difficult working conditions, Isaiah challenges you to see that you have power as believers armed with God's Spirit, to bring life and healing to the nations, to people who have come from all over the world and now work at your company. This is Jesus' method of justice. It is justice from the bottom up, one person at a time.

### III. The Perfection of Justice (Isaiah 42:4)

**He will not grown dim nor be crushed  
until he has established justice in the earth;  
and the coastlands wait expectantly for his teaching.  
(Isa 42:4 adapted from the ESV)**

#### A. The servant won't be crushed until...

Humanly speaking, when we give ourselves to care for people whose faith is dim or whose burdens are overwhelming, our countenance can easily grow dark and our spirit crushed. But not this servant. Because of his continual dependence on the empowering life of God's Spirit, his faith is never extinguished, nor is his spirit crushed "until he has established justice in the earth."

Eventually the sins of the world will crush him and he will die under its weight, but not until he completes his task. Even during the agony of the cross when Jesus was taking on the sin and suffering of the whole world, he was still offering his life to put human relationships in the right. It is there he honors his mother and passes on the responsibility of her care to his beloved disciple, John (John 19:27). And for the criminal crucified alongside him who recognizes his sin and pleads for mercy, Jesus lifts the burden of his sin and fans the flame of his faith with the promise that he shall be with him in paradise (Luke 23:40-43). And to all those people who crucify him, he prays, "Father, forgive them." He offers them grace.

#### B. Justice is perfected

After Cleopas and his wife encountered the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus, their view of the crucifixion was turned upside down. As Jesus took on the world's suffering and died under its weight, the power of sin and death was broken and with his resurrection the beginning of God's new creation had begun. As Tom Wright observes, their earlier statement, "They crucified him – but we had hoped he would redeem Israel" would shortly become, "They crucified him – and that is *how* he did redeem Israel."<sup>4</sup>

God's message of love and hope is not limited to Israel, but is everlasting and will extend to every nation and people group on earth. Isaiah says, it will be long-awaited for – "The coastlands will

wait [expectantly] for his law (i.e. "his teaching")." "Coastlands" and "islands" signified the most remote places on the earth from Israel's standpoint. The coastlands were not waiting for a law, but for a relationship with the living God, with all the privileges Israel had. When Jesus commissioned his disciples to make disciples of all nations, they were to go forth with the expectation that the nations were already longing for this good news. Anywhere you go, any place in the world, you will find people waiting expectantly for this justice.

### IV. What is the Gospel?

#### A. A redefinition of the gospel: Are you his servant?

Normally we are taught that the message of the gospel is this: Believe the right things about Jesus and you will receive the gift of forgiveness and go to heaven when you die. But Isaiah's Servant Song offers us a better definition: Give up (repent) your way of being in control and follow Jesus, and you will receive the gift of forgiveness and the full measure of his life-giving Spirit, so that out of your suffering, you will have the joy of liberating those in darkness wherever he sends you.

So the question is, "Are you a servant?" When you get up in the morning, no matter what your situation or title, you are the most powerful person in the place where God has put you – your company, your school, your neighborhood. Since you have the fullness of God's Spirit, you are God's instrument to bring justice.

#### B. Where is justice to be found?

My last question to us this morning is, "Where is justice found?" Jesus said that we are the salt and light of the earth. Right now there are revolutions happening all over the world. People don't like oppression so they oust brutal dictators but then put someone just like him in his place. Capitalism and democracy are not the saviors of the world. They can be as oppressive and idolatrous as dictatorships. America is not the savior of the world. You, the servant of Christ, are the only hope this world has for justice. We can't complain about the world because we are it. We cannot complain about other political parties, about other nations or corporations, because we are the only ones – those who follow Jesus – who have the equipment to right the wrongs and bring justice on earth. This is gospel. Amen.

*Therefore, prepare your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you. To him be dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Pet 1:13; 5:10-11)*

1. If this is the same "Clopas" mentioned in John 19:25, then it is possible that the other disciple is his wife, Mary.
2. John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 40-66* (NITOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 111.
3. N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 167.
4. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, 294.

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