

CAN I GET A WITNESS?***(Isaiah 49:1-7; John 1:29-42)***

A “witness” is a person who sees, hears or knows something by personal presence and perception, and who is willing to testify to or give evidence of that which they claim to see, hear or know.

An example would be all the people who are presently under the sound of my voice who are Green Bay Packer fans, and who constantly witness—according to THEIR personal presence and perception—to their belief that Green Bay is such a great team; and they are willing to testify to or give evidence of that which they claim to see, hear and know by pointing to all the championships the Packers have won, and all the “Hail Mary” passes the Packers have completed, and how the Packers have won their last 7 games, and how they all proudly wear all the Packer shirts they’ve got... All to be a witness—according to THEIR personal presence and perception—to their belief that the Packers are such a great team.

It's kinda sad really . . .

Nevertheless, it helps us to understand the concept of “being a witness;” because we know that in Wisconsin, when it comes to being able to “get a witness,” the PACKERS can get a witness!

Can I get an “AMEN?”

II.

Our scripture lessons for this day—this day on which we *worship* God, *praise* Jesus, *receive a fresh anointing* from the Holy Spirit, and *celebrate* the life of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.—are all about *being a witness*. They are also all about what we who believe in God through Jesus Christ should be a witness *to*, and be a witness *for*.

Our scripture readings today start in Isaiah, with the voice of a servant of God. However, in this particular genre of scripture, it's not just the voice of *any* servant of God. It is the voice of the one who will eventually be called the *Suffering Servant* of God by the time we reach

the 53rd chapter of Isaiah; the nameless one that we are introduced to earlier in Isaiah's book of prophecy, in chapter 42:1-4, where God says:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold; my chosen in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring justice to the nations. He won't call attention to what he does with loud speeches or gaudy parades. He won't brush aside the bruised and the hurt, and he won't disregard what is considered to be the small and insignificant; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. Far-flung ocean islands wait expectantly for his teaching.

The Servant of God just got a witness! And not just ANY witness; the Servant of God got GOD as a witness! Because God is testifying, and giving evidence of what God claims to see, hear and know concerning God's Suffering Servant.

It seems quite clear from God's introduction of the Servant of the Lord that the main mission the servant is given is to *bring justice to the nations; to establish justice on earth; to faithfully bring forth justice.*

"Justice" in the Hebrew scriptures is a concept that has to do with being faithful in relationship—and in actions that carry out relationship—in

ways that are pleasing in God's sight. In other words, "justice" means *yes, we ARE our brother's and our sister's keeper*. It even goes beyond human relationships to extend to our relationship to the earth, and the resources of the earth. We can do justice to our planet and our planet's resources by being in right relationship with them in ways that are pleasing in God's sight, or not.

In our lesson from Isaiah this morning from chapter 49 we have another passage of scripture from the *Suffering Servant* genre; but this time it is not God speaking, it is the *Servant of God* speaking. And this time the tables are turned, because now we have the Servant of God bearing witness to God! So now GOD is getting a witness!

After the Servant gets our attention, he tells us:

- God *called* him to be God's servant before he was even born;
- God *named* him while he was still in his mother's womb;
- God *put* truth in his mouth; truth that would cut like a sharp sword;

I tell you, if this is a riddle—as in “who do YOU think the Suffering Servant is”—my guess is Jesus! Didn’t we just celebrate how Gabriel came to Mary, and announced that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit with a *special* child; a child who would be *great*, and who would be called the Son of the Most High? Sounds like “a calling before he was even born” to me!

Didn’t the angel Gabriel say to Mary, while the child was still in the womb, that they were to name the child *Jesus*? Sounds like he was “named while he was still in his mother’s womb” to me!

Didn’t Jesus himself say in Luke’s gospel that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him, anointing him to *speak truth* to the poor, the imprisoned, the oppressed, the blind, and all who were waiting for the day of God’s favor? Sounds like God “putting truth in the Servant’s mouth” to me!

If this is a riddle, I believe the answer is Jesus!

III.

“And now . . .” says the Lord God to the Servant of the Lord God, ***“I’ve got something bigger for you to do than to just recover the tribes of Jacob, or to round up the survivors of Israel. Instead, I’m setting you up as a light for the nations, so my salvation will reach to the ends of the earth.”***

Sounds to me like Jesus the Suffering Servant was given the role by God that was originally given to *Abraham and Sarah, to Isaac and Rebekah, to Jacob, Leah and Rachel, and to the nation of Israel itself*. God told Abraham in Genesis 12 that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed, because his descendants were intended to be a “light to the nations.”

And so Jesus, the Suffering Servant of God, accepts the role that Israel was given to do, in solemn covenant with God, to not just do justice and bring the light of God’s salvation to Israel, but to do justice and bring the light of God’s salvation to the whole wide world!

In other words, God is asking what turns out to be our sermonic question today, which is *“Can I get a witness? A witness that will speak to the whole earth, and call forth the justice that I desire for all, and to shine the saving light of my presence on everyone?”*

Talk about a tough job! No wonder the figure described in Isaiah is described as a *“Suffering Servant.”* No way that God’s justice gets poured through you in the midst of this world, and you don’t suffer for even bringing it up! No way that you are used to bring the message of God’s salvation for *everyone*, that you are not deeply despised, ‘buked and scorned, and talked about sure’s you born!

If you are truly a servant of God, deeply involved in God’s agenda of justice and salvation in and for this world, there is NO WAY you are not suffering in your servanthood. The world we live in will make sure of that!

Can I get a witness now?

IV.

Our lesson from John's gospel this morning reminds us that the central job of a disciple of Jesus is to be a witness; to be someone who sees, hears and knows Jesus from personal presence or perception, and who is willing to testify or give evidence for what they see, hear and know. John the Baptist—who is not the same John who wrote the gospel—knows all about what it takes to be a witness! Every time he saw Jesus, John said *“Look, there he is, the Lamb of God.”* *“Look, here he is, the one whom God has sent in our midst.”* And he was always prepared to tell people why he believed it to be so. The passage of scripture in John's gospel right before the one we are working with today tells of a group of Pharisees who go to John the Baptist and ask him who he is, what is he doing, and who told him to do it! That's how John ends up giving his testimony about Jesus; about seeing the Spirit descending from above on Jesus, in the form of a dove—just like God told John to look for. And the dove didn't just touch him and fly away; it STAYED on

Jesus, it REMAINED on Jesus—something else God told John to look for.

He is the one, says John, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit!

When some of John the Baptist's disciples turned toward Jesus and asked him where he was staying, Jesus's simple answer to them was "come and see." So they did. They followed Jesus. And their discipleship began. Their relationship with Jesus began. Because that is what discipleship is: a relationship with Jesus.

But it is a relationship that is not for the faint at heart.

Because the witness of Jesus is justice.

Justice is being faithful to our relationship to one another as brothers and sisters under the parenthood of God.

It is that mission which Jesus came to fulfill, as the Servant of God who must suffer. The Servant of God who takes away the sin of the world, the brokenness of the world, the cruelty of the world, the injustice of the world.

Being a true servant of God is a dangerous business.

It got Jesus hung on a cross.

It got Peter hung on a cross upside-down.

It got Martin Luther thrown out of the church.

It got Martin Luther King shot in the head.

It got a mighty cloud of witnesses—some of whose names only God knows—tortured, abused, and killed.

But being a witness to the love and justice of God—for EVERYONE—is what every servant of God is called to be and do.

God is calling, and God wants to know,

“Can I get a witness?”