

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 16, 2018
Isaiah 50:4-10
“The One Who Vindicates is Near”

The winter of 1925 was terrifying for the residents of Nome, Alaska. After treating four cases of what appeared to be tonsillitis, the only doctor in town, Doctor Curtis Welch, came to a horrifying conclusion. The extremely contagious diphtheria had been confirmed. Without an antitoxin, the whole town of two thousand people and their surrounding native neighbors would very likely all die.

The problem was magnified because the shipping ports had long been closed for the winter, aircraft travel was impossible for aircraft in those days had open cockpits, and even worse, the diphtheria antitoxin could only last six days in the freezing temperatures of the arctic. The closest source of the life-saving drug was Anchorage, Alaska, one thousand miles away. The Alaskan railroad could bring the drug to Nenana, but Nome was still 675 miles from there.

The decision was made. The only way to save the isolated residents was to deliver the serum by dogsled. A relay of twenty teams each traveling approximately thirty miles was coordinated. It was forty degrees below zero when the first dogsledder, Wild Bill Shannon, left Nenana with his life-bringing thirty-pound package of serum.

For even the most experienced dogsledder forty degrees below zero is brutal and dangerous. But with so many lives hanging in the balance, Wild Bill had no choice. He set his face to the wind and peered into the bleak darkness ahead of him. Breaking the silence of the cold, crisp night, the cracking of his whip sounded like a lightning strike. As Bill cried out, “Mush” the clock was ticking.

For all of us, there are times when the path of our life looks dark and difficult. There are times when we are unsure which direction we should take or whether we should take any direction at all. These are times we may not be called to bring life-saving antitoxins to a remote village in Alaska, but we are called into the darkness nonetheless and the darkness is frightening. When these moments appear in our lives, where do we find the strength and courage to move forward? Our reading for today sheds some divine light in this.

The lesson for today is from the fiftieth chapter of Isaiah. It is what theologians call the “Third Servant Song” in Isaiah. In the Jewish world there is even today debate about whether the Servant in Isaiah is the nation of Israel, the prophet Isaiah himself, or the promised coming Messiah. As Christians, we hear the witness of the texts and we see that each of the songs paints a picture of the Servant. And with each new song, the picture is flushed out more and more until you see that the Servant can be no one other than Jesus, the Promised Messiah, who came into the world in order to redeem the world.

Listen again to the description of the Servant which Isaiah paints for us today. The Servant is speaking, "The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary. Morning by morning He awakens; He awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught. The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious; I turned not backward" (Isaiah 50:4-5). Here the Servant declares Himself to be one who sustains the weary and listens to the Lord. Because He listens to the Lord He has not been rebellious and does not turn away. In the next verse we get a stark description: "I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting" (Isaiah 50:6). Here it is clear, is it not? This is an Old Testament preview of what we see actually coming to pass in the life of Jesus. In fact, as Matthew tells the story he includes this account: "Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters and they gathered the whole battalion before Him. And they stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him and twisting together a crown of thorns they put it on His head and put a reed in His right hand. And kneeling before Him, they mocked Him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' And they spit on Him and took the reed and struck Him on the head. And when they had mocked Him, they stripped Him of the robe and put His own clothes on Him and led Him away to crucify Him" (Matthew 27:27-31). Clearly Jesus is the Servant foretold by Isaiah.

And what does this Servant do amidst all these obstacles, hardships, and suffering? Verse 7 of our text for today has the answer. "But the Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame" (Isaiah 50:7). He sets His face like flint and is not put to shame. He encounters Satan in the wilderness and sets His face like flint upon God's Word and will. He sets His face like flint as He determines that He is going to Jerusalem in the days leading up to what we call Holy Week. He sets His face like flint in the Garden of Gethsemane praying that the cup of God's wrath might pass from Him but resolving even more that the Father's will would be done.

There are times in our lives too when our path ahead is dark. You're familiar with these times. Perhaps it's when you've undergone a series of tests and the diagnosis is not good. Maybe it's the pink slip at the end of the work day. Perhaps it more common, mundane. There is too much to do and too little time to do it. Or there is plenty of time but not enough energy to get it done or even to get it started. In each case we find ourselves like the Servant. The world is beating us up, slapping our backs, mocking, and spitting on us. It is all a reflection of the human heart after the fall. And our own sinful condition will at times whisper doubts and fears into our hearts with the result that we begin to question whether God even cares.

The Stoics would have an answer. They would tell us to "buck up and endure." One of the most famous Stoics, Marcus Aurelius, once said, "Everything that happens is either endurable or not. If it's endurable, the endure it. Stop complaining. If it's unendurable, then stop complaining. Your destruction will mean its end as well." One well-meaning, stoic-like friend likes to tell me, "Get over it!"

Or we could turn to the Epicureans to shed some light on our darkened path. They would encourage you not to get too attached to anything in this world because someday it will all be

gone. They would advise you to just live for today. But that offers no hope, because a life without attachment is a life without true joy.

Sadly there are also many Christians who will tell you that the answer is for you to pray harder or trust God more. They'll say that if we just find a little more strength internally, we can get through whatever struggles life throws at us.

The Servant, however, provides a better way. The key is found in our text in the confession of the Servant. "He who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who is my adversary? Let him come near to me" (Isaiah 50:8). We've already seen that the Servant is Jesus. Why would He need vindication? Why is it important for Him to confess that the one who vindicates is near? Of course, for His own sake, Jesus had no need of vindication. He had no sin. His standing before His Father was secure. But for our sake, when the path ahead of us is dark and bleak, it's important for us to find two things in God's vindication of Jesus.

First, we should understand that the root cause of all doubt is our separation from God after the fall. There was a time when humankind walked with God in the cool of the day. There were no worries or concerns because God was near to them. The knowledge that He was creator and they creature was comforting. He would care for His creation every moment. But when sin entered the world, mankind broke that intimate relationship with its creator. Now we doubt whether God is near to us, walks with us, or even cares about us at all. That separation from God is precisely what Jesus took upon Himself on the cross and finds its clearest expression in the cry of dereliction: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46).

And secondly, we should remember that God sent the Servant into the world to provide vindication for His beloved. Jesus was fully human and fully divine, but He allowed Himself to rely only on the promises of God's Word. While confronting Satan in the wilderness, there was real temptation. Before entering into Jerusalem, He must have paused, because He knew what awaited Him there. During that night in the garden, He cried out to God to take the cup away from Him. Yet in each of these moments, indeed in every moment, the God who vindicates was near. And Jesus set His face like flint and marched on to Calvary. There, by means of His atoning death, he reconciled us to God, restored the relationship that was broken. So now we can be just as assured as the Servant was that indeed the one who vindicates is near. He walks with us.

The cure for your dark times is to remember that this same Jesus, this Servant of Yahweh, has walked before you. He who needed no vindication nevertheless came in order to put all of His trust in the promises of the Father to do exactly that, to declare Him to be the very Son of God by raising Him from the dead. Jesus, obeying His Father perfectly, dying in our place to pay our debt, rising from the grave, has done everything that needed to be done. We need do nothing. Now we can also totally trust the same promises of the Father that the Servant, Jesus, trusted, namely, that in His good time, God the Father will vindicate us by declaring for all to hear that we are His own beloved children.

When the guilt of your sin is overwhelming, remember that the one who vindicates is near. When the diagnosis is not what you were hoping and praying for, remember that the one who vindicates is near. When the pink slip arrives or the work ahead seems impossible, remember that the one who vindicates is near. God, who vindicates His people by forgiving their sin and remembering their iniquities no more is always near. He is as near as the body and blood of Jesus Christ distributed at the altar. He is as near as the baptismal font. He is as near as His Word. He is with you always. You are His.

It was two o'clock in the morning when Gunnar Kaasen and his dog team arrived in Nome. After the work of twenty dog sled teams, five grueling days, and 675 miles, the antitoxin arrived in the hands of the doctor. The town could be saved. But it did not come without cost. Some of the dogs had died. Some of the dogsledders suffered severe frostbite and lost toes and fingers. Today of course the Iditarod sled dog race is performed every year in order to commemorate the accomplishment of this life-saving feat in 1925.

For us Christians our victory was secured when the Servant broke through death and won eternal victory not for Himself for but each one of us. Even in our sins, even in our doubts, and even in the very troubles with which a sinful world assaults us, Jesus has vindicated us, and He is always near. And because He is we go forth assured and joyful that we are vindicated, all of our sins are forgiven in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.