

Between Horizons

The other night I had a bad dream.

In the dream, John and I and some friends were going to attend a worship service that was being held in a really large stadium. There were 1000's of people, like a bi-national assembly or something like that, and we must have had a room near by, because John and our friends went ahead to find our seats and I stayed behind in the room to have a nap because I didn't have any responsibility in the service, and said I would come along shortly. I woke up just after the service started, made my way to the stadium, was crossing the floor at the front, looking for the right aisle that would take me way up to where our seats were and someone I knew came along and put a lapel mic on me, handed me the scripture, and said it was time to read.

Startled, but game to try, I look up at the crowd, move to the podium and start to read, but for some reason I can't comprehend what I'm reading. It's not anything with which I'm familiar. The crowd starts growing restless and uncomfortable so someone decides it's a good time to serve the muffins, (this is a dream remember) and so of course everyone is paying attention to the passing of the muffins and not to the reading, so I just stop and wait, and when everything settles down again, I begin to read again, but now the reading is on a glossy hexagon shaped piece of paper, so that I can't really see every word and when I get to the end of one line, I'm not sure where the next line begins, so I try to read where I think it's going but what was difficult to understand before now becomes completely incomprehensible and I also realize that no one

told me how far I was supposed to read and so finally I just decide to finish with a last line that says something like “and that seed fell among the shade.”

To let people know that I’m finished reading, I meekly offer, “the word of the Lord.” I don’t think anyone responded with, “thanks be to God.” I go and I find my seat. Besides being completely mortified by the experience, I find myself wondering if there was any part of that reading that God could use anyway, that God could make comprehensible or meaningful to anyone.

It was just a dream and we could probably have some fun analyzing it. Did I have this dream because the quality of scripture reading tends to be a popular topic in my house? There’s probably some truth to that, but for the purposes of this sermon, I’ll tell you why I think it was worth repeating. Before I went to bed that night, I knew that my sermon theme based on studying our texts for today was going to be God uses our humanness for God’s purposes.

Let’s look at one of the primary texts together - Beginning with Isaiah’s poetry in chapter 49. Feel free to follow along in your bulletins.

The great I Am or Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb God named me.

To be born of a mother, to be formed in a womb, to be called by name by the great I AM, implies full humanity and specialness – known and named prior to a fully human birth.

In 49:2 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.

This human is like a hidden weapon in God's hand. Although we as pacifists don't like to think of God having or using a weapon, the poetry here uses that image. Mysteriously hidden or kept by God for the right time we can presume that at the very least the sword or arrow-like words of this human will one day pierce something.

49:3 And God said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

Okay, now we don't know if the servant is one individual human or a whole nation Israel, but still the purpose of the human servant (individual or nation) is so that God will be known and glorified.

But now in verse 4 this human servant despairs

49:4 "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." I think this means that human strength apart from God is in vain.

Verse 5 is a re-iteration of what we've heard so far with a slight change.

49:5 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**- That's the change - it is not the human's strength alone that matters here but God has become the servant's strength.

In verse 6 God 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."

Israel, individual servant or whole nation, as servant of God in God's hands with God as strength with God as the bearer of the weapon will bring light to the nations and salvation to the ends of the earth.

And finally verse 7. The identity of this Holy One – is one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers. One day these same rulers will bow down when they realize that this despised one is actually the Chosen One of a faithful God.

Now jump to the gospel of John. Our tradition tells us that John the Baptist bears witness to the "chosenness of Jesus," by observing the descent of the dove upon him and then says, "I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God." The next day two of John's disciples change their allegiance from John to Jesus. After that Jesus does some choosing and some naming of his own. In verse 42, "Andrew brings Simon to Jesus and Jesus looked at him and changed his name from Simon to Cephas which means Peter. The story after this we hear about Jesus' prior knowledge of Nathaniel.

Sound familiar? Just as God chooses and names a servant born of a woman, so Jesus chooses and names in this case deeply fallible humans who will also be part of accomplishing God's purpose. We know the gospel stories. The humans who follow Jesus don't often get it right. Noting first that the role of Christ is uniquely powerful and often equated with the suffering servant in these songs of Isaiah, those who follow this Christ and seek to embody him in the world also know something of being chosen and named; chosen and claimed for God's

purpose.

As Christ followers at TUMC we live in this tradition.

Now what if we can barely comprehend or make comprehensible that claim on our lives? What if we are given a lapel mic and told it's time to read and we can't even make sense of the words? Well let's hope it's never that bad. It was a bad dream after all. But that's partly the nature of living *Between the Horizons* of garden and new city as our *Being a Faithful Church* process points out so well. (For those who aren't familiar, the BFC process aims to help us discern biblically based responses to difficult questions of how to live faithfully as human sexual beings.) If we get frustrated and impatient with the process, or we're not sure how it's all going to turn out, it sure is tempting just to pass the muffins. And what if it doesn't turn out quite like we hope? It can soon feel like we've labored in vain or spent our strength for nothing. That's when it's particularly important to note as the poetry in Isaiah does that God's purposes will be accomplished when God has become our strength. God's strength can and does infuse our human bodies – formed and made as they were in the wombs of our human mothers. And it is there in our mothers' bodies that we were already known and named and claimed whether we can comprehend that or make it comprehensible. And so let's not wonder about it, as I did in my dream, but be confident that God's strength and purpose makes our lives meaningful.