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Isaiah 50: 4-9a

Sermon by Howard Wallace

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Isaiah has been our close traveling companion during this liturgical year, from Advent through Christmas, the Baptism of Jesus, into Epiphany, and now he will lead us into Holy Week and help prepare us for the great events of Easter, help us understand them. He does this in part by telling the story of an anonymous individual living probably in Babylon in the Jewish ghetto there through the latter part of exile in the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century.

This man's experience encapsulated the wider experience of Judeans in exile; what happened to him and what he endured provided a basis for hope for his people. As we journey towards Holy Week and Easter we follow his experience day by day culminating in the story of what was possibly his death which we will read on Good Friday. His story will shed light even on the story of Jesus in his passion.

We have heard something of this man's story already. We read the first part of his story on the day we celebrated Jesus' baptism (Isa. 42:1-4). He was introduced as 'my servant' by none other than God. God's spirit is given to him to bring justice to the nations. He does not promote himself but seeks justice with compassion for the weak. He will not give up on the task until justice is established.

In the second part of his story (Isa. 49:1-7) which we read on Epiphany 2, we heard the servant's own voice. He speaks about his sense of vocation and calling, as one who speaks for God. He describes himself as God's sharp arrow, his mouth is God's two-edged sword. He sounds like one of the prophets. But, like Jeremiah, the prophet's task is not easy – it all seems to be in vain, a waste of effort, a shooting after the wind.

His task has been to speak with the Israelites, to bring them back to the Lord; but now the Lord sends him not only to his own people but as a 'light to the nations', taking the story of this God of exiles to the courts and inner sanctums of international power. As if vain efforts among his neighbours were not enough, he is to be exposed now on a greater stage.

As we reach today's reading (Isa. 50:4-9a), we hear again the servant's voice. Things are becoming more serious. The servant has maintained his faithfulness in his tasks and in his calling (v. 5) even finding courage in his tasks. This is the more remarkable because his faithfulness has brought him persecution: he has been struck, he has been shamed by having his beard pulled out, he has been insulted, he has been spat at. Yet somehow he does not feel disgraced and finds strength to challenge opponents – "who are my adversaries. Let them confront me. Let them wear out like a garment, the moths will eat them up".

What sustains this servant? He tells us. Four times he mentions the Lord God in this passage, and this carries the clue to his task:

The Lord God has given me a tongue  
The Lord God has opened my ear  
Lord God help me  
Lord God help me.

1. The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher to sustain the weary. A tongue – a persuasive, credible word presumably about Yahweh, the servant’s God
  - that sustains the weary
  - that is life-giving
  - that confronts words that deny life, that deplete energy, that question truth, that deny identity.

These are not just simple words of comfort, and pastoral concern. This is a word that has power to confront the life draining, life denying power of the Babylonian Empire and give the weary hope.

In our Bible the text says the servant has as the ‘tongue of a teacher’ but in the Hebrew it is ‘the tongue of those taught’ – this one is not just one who is wise, but one who has learned through experience himself – a disciple.

2. The Lord God has opened the servant’s ear – as one taught he hears and is not rebellious. The servant is unflinching in obedience, even at great cost.

We may think this cost relates to persecution by the Babylonians – this is possible; but more likely it is a reference to persecution from his fellow exiles for whom the commitment to the life-giving word of Yahweh is too costly, or who do not want their comfortable compromise with the Babylonian authorities disturbed. This servant hears and speaks the uncomfortable words his compatriots cannot cope with.

3. The Lord God helps this servant
  - as he faces possible legal challenges
  - at the very least in public opposition to him.

What sustains him, and helps him is the surety – ‘he who vindicates him is near’. The embracing help of God enfolds this servant in the midst of social, legal problems, and challenges, in the midst of embarrassment, disgrace, public humiliation and even physical abuse.

It opens his ear to hear again the word of truth, calling him constantly to discipleship, and sending him out with the word to speak that gives life.

This is what sustains this servant. It is what sustains all whom God calls ‘servant’.

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On Good Friday, we will hear the end of this servant's story. In his suffering he will be seen by others as one who - bears the sins of the people  
- and carries their iniquities.

But these same people will see in him the echo of God who bears them up, carries them, who sustains them, helps them, and gives them the gifts necessary to undertake the task to which they are called.

These same people later in Isaiah will also bear the title 'servants of the Lord'.

All who take that title upon themselves in discipleship are charged not only with confronting what denies life, truth, the sense of identity and value in the world – whatever keeps the weary that way – but are reminded it is God who helps them, who provides a persuasive, credible word, one that is strong enough to bear both personal attack and to face the powers of a Babylonian government, the injustice of a Pilate, or the subtle and not so subtle forms of corruption or injustice at work in our own world.

“He who vindicates his servant is near”.

That is what this one with the tongue of a teacher has passed on to us.