

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

Dr. Thomas P. Harp

January 13, 2008

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

An Odd Declaration of New Things

Isaiah 42:1-9

In spring of 1974 a tornado smashed through Louisville, Kentucky. I remember it well since I was on Grinstead Drive driving home from seminary after an afternoon class. I was heading for Interstate 64 listening to helicopter rush hour traffic information on the local radio station. The voice on the radio was rather excited saying that he was following a tornado heading for Cherokee Park. He thought it was likely to hit the Grinstead Drive Interstate 64 interchange. That news got my full attention. Needless to say, fortunately I beat the tornado to the intersection and got home safely. I watched in my rear view mirror as it crossed the interstate and headed up Grinstead Drive.

The next day the newspaper printed a picture of a woman marching on Bardstown Road. She carried a sign that proclaimed the tornado was God's judgment against Louisville because of horse racing and the liquor industry. Most of us laughed that judgment off, but I have no doubt she believed every word of it. Truth be told, many such disasters are interpreted as God's judgment against the people. As I recall some people said Hurricane Katrina was God's judgment against New Orleans. No doubt some thought the Tsunami a couple of years ago was God's judgment against the people of Malaysia and India who lost their lives.

Now you and I are reluctant to associate such disasters with God's judgment, but the biblical prophets often drew such conclusions. And while discussion of that lies outside the scope of this sermon, we must understand that there is a degree of truth to such a conclusion. After all if you build your house in a flood zone or a hurricane prone area, it's quite natural to conclude that God is not pleased with such defiance of nature. However, that is a different matter than blaming horse racing and the liquor industry for a tornado. Nevertheless, please understand that if you believe such an event is God's judgment you will respond to it differently than if you do not.

Imagine then that you and I are exiled in Babylon after Jerusalem has been destroyed. That's not unlike, I suggest, being exiled in Houston after New Orleans was destroyed. Further, imagine that we have believed the claims that the destruction of our homes was God's judgment against us. I think you'll agree that we would feel guilty, depressed, beaten down. We might even have given up on God. At the very least we might feel like we really failed God. Even if we hadn't given up on God in that situation, we might believe that surely God has given up on us. Otherwise, those terrible events would not have happened. Hear me out. I am NOT saying those events were God's will. I am saying, however, that some people understood them that way, and doing so, they felt rejected by God. Imagine being among them, assuming that God has rejected you.

Then listen to these words from one of the religious leaders you trust, one who has spoken the truth to you before even truth you did not want to hear. Listen as he says: "Behold my servant, who I have chosen, in whom my soul delights... thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and the earth, who gives life to the people and spirit to those who hear." What servant is he talking about? Does he mean the prophet himself? Could he be referring to the very people who believed God had rejected them? Christians, of course, hear those verses and immediately think of Jesus. After all, Jesus quoted the passage about himself. Light to the nations, opening

blind eyes, setting prisoners free — the description fits! So naturally we think of Jesus when we hear those words. But they aren't limited to Jesus. Certainly, Jesus fits the description. But there are other possibilities.

For starters, the prophet seems to understand himself as the servant. "I have called you," God says to the prophet. "I have taken you by the hand and kept you." Yet, at the same time, the prophet is reminding the people of Israel that they are God's chosen ones. Why speak to them otherwise? Must we force the issue? Must we choose between the prophet as an individual and the people as a faith-community? I don't think so. The Bible's quite content to speak of Jacob when it means the whole people of Israel. It seems appropriate for us to be content with the same. These prophetic words can refer both to the prophet as an individual called by God and to the people as a community called by God.

And, to be sure, the words provide a unique understanding of Jesus. Who better fits the description: "He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break and a dimly burning wick he will not quench?" There can be little doubt these words describe Jesus better than any other person. But Jesus, like the prophet before him, encouraged disciples to follow in his footsteps, to take his ministry upon themselves. Not only were the prophet, the people of Israel, and Jesus called by God to be a light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind and to set the prisoners free, but so are we. Those who have answered the call of Jesus, those whose eyes he has opened, those whom he has freed from prison, are called to be servants of God in like manner. Yes, Jesus fits the prophet's description. Now here's a surprise. So do we!

Like the people of Israel, we too have heard God say that the former things have come to pass, and new things lie before us. Remember this is the God who created the heavens and the earth. The breaking down of old ways, of old communities, of old patterns of thought may just be a necessary step in the building up of the new. To be sure, we might prefer another path. We might prefer that cities were not destroyed and that communities did not suffer. And I will not stand before you claiming that it is God's will that they do. But I do believe it is God's will that we establish justice and open the eyes of the blind, that we be a light to the nations that will draw people to Christ.

In Christ, God has created a new people, calling them to be a servant people, people who seek not their own ends, but the ends of their Lord and Master. When we are baptized, God sets us free from self interest and calls us to a new way of life. We're free to love, to love God and love our neighbors. Free to turn away from the culture of violence, and to take up the pathway of peace. We are called to establish justice. How? By establishing caring human relationships and a new appreciation for the neighbor who may be different from us. How? By teaching others of Christ, and calling people to trust him. How? By being a light to the nations that opens blind eyes and frees those imprisoned by old understanding. It may be an odd declaration of new things, but this passage calls us to be a new people, building a new world in Christ.

It is the same God who created the heavens and the earth who calls us to be a new creation. Surely we understand that God has the power to accomplish the new creation, beginning with each one of us. Why? Because borrowing the words of the prophet, "In Christ you are my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights, says the Lord. I have put my spirit upon you to bring forth justice, to be a light to the nations, to open eyes that are blind." It may take awhile for us to see progress, but we will not faint or grow weary until God has accomplished in us, and in the world around us, that new creation.