



Roanoke, Virginia

January 15, 2023

## ***“Servanthood”***

*Isaiah 42:1-9*

**Rev. Benjamin Shaw Brannan**

**42** Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my spirit upon him;  
he will bring forth justice to the nations.  
**2** He will not cry or lift up his voice,  
or make it heard in the street;  
**3** a bruised reed he will not break,  
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;  
he will faithfully bring forth justice.  
**4** He will not grow faint or be crushed  
until he has established justice in the earth;  
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.  
**5** Thus says God, the Lord,  
who created the heavens and stretched them out,  
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,  
who gives breath to the people upon it  
and spirit to those who walk in it:  
**6** I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,  
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;  
I have given you as a covenant to the people,<sup>a</sup>



a light to the nations,  
**7** to open the eyes that are blind,  
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,  
from the prison those who sit in darkness.  
**8** I am the Lord, that is my name;  
my glory I give to no other,  
nor my praise to idols.  
**9** See, the former things have come to pass,  
and new things I now declare;  
before they spring forth,  
I tell you of them.

The servant of Isaiah’s servant songs, the one called by God, will be patient, nonviolent, and merciful. God’s chosen servant will bring forth justice, but through gentleness and care. The servant of God will be inclined toward helping those who are vulnerable, nurturing ideas still finding ground, protecting and encouraging the least of creation. “A bruised reed he will not break,” Isaiah says, “a dimly burning wick he will not quench.” As Stephanie Paulsell describes in her commentary, “God’s servant will protect what is weak until it is strong enough to stand, and keeps gentle hands cupped around a weak flame until it can burn on its own.”<sup>1</sup>

This is a startling contrast to leaders around the world who seek out war and violence to further their own agendas at the expense of others, leaders who shame and bash others, banging their own drums and raising their voices to muddle the voices of those they oppose, or worse those they serve.

What would it look like if those in positions of power sought to quietly give tender care to the bruised reeds and the dimly burning wicks of the world?

Paulsell continues, “Over the quick satisfaction of ‘shock and awe,’ the Servant chooses patient, but never-ceasing work for justice, work that takes root, work that steadily fans good ideas into flames.” The servant of God will be persistent in patience, never-ending in nurture, and will offer quiet care for those around them.

But who is this Servant of God?

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<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Paulsell, Pastoral Perspective Essay, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2*



Some scholars have theorized it to be a particular person. Perhaps Cyrus, the historical king of Persia, who defeated Babylon and allowed Israel to return to her land and rebuild the temple. Cyrus is mentioned as a servant of God.

Perhaps Isaiah was pointing back to Abraham and the justice that came from the covenant of blessings, or to Moses and the justice God revealed in the Torah.

Other scholars think Isaiah was pointing to a community, perhaps Israel. Israel is explicitly mentioned in other parts of Isaiah as being God's chosen servant.

As Christians, we cannot help but hear and see the work and person of Jesus Christ.

The people around Jesus wanted him to raise his voice, shout out against Rome and overthrow the government, be the triumphant king they expected. He preached gentleness and love and told others not to tell people about him. Jesus cared for the lowly, the oppressed; he cured and healed, restored and forgave, and gave his life in sacrificial love. And he chose a donkey instead of a war horse.

We must remember that Jesus knew Isaiah's words. And his ministry is modeled after images and symbols, hopes and visions of Scripture. Jesus reads from Isaiah in the synagogue as a child: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me... to proclaim release to the captives and recover the sight of the blind, to let the oppressed go free..."

And when Jesus came out of the waters of the Jordan at baptism, "the heavens were opened to him, and the Spirit of God descended like a dove alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.""

This is the commissioning of Jesus to a vocation of Servanthood.

Jesus even said himself, "I came not to be served, but to serve."

But we cannot stop here.

Biblical scholar Paul Hanson finds in this passage not a reference to any one historical person or community, but "a catalyst for reflection on the nature of the response demanded of those who have received a call from God."<sup>2</sup>

We have a portrait of the Servant here, but it is also a silhouette. Anyone who brings light and hope to those around them stands in the place of the Servant.

"Here is my servant," God says at the beginning; then, halfway through: Here are you!

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Hanson, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Isaiah 40-66*



Just as the heavens opened and the Spirit of God descended on Jesus, God's love washes over us through the waters of baptism as we are called beloved children of God, with whom God is well-pleased. So too, it is our commissioning to a vocation of Servanthood.

We are the servant! We individually and we collectively! —

If the Servant is one who will not cry or lift up his voice or make it heard in the streets, then we can work for the good of others by doing small acts of kindness without needing the acknowledgement or praise from others.

If the Servant is one who will care and protect a bruised reed, then we can care and protect the vulnerable, those who are hurting or in pain, the homeless, the elderly, and the uninsured, and the classmate who needs a friend.

If the Servant is one who will not quench a dimly burning wick, then we can cup our hands around and encourage the dreams of our young people until the flames are shining bright on their own.

Here is my servant, and here is you!

Here is you, Second Presbyterian, as you tutor at Highland Park, knit hats to keep the kids warm during the winter, and give hours at the Presbyterian Community Center Pathways Program.

Here is you, Second Presbyterian, as you collect coats for kids at the West End Center and Christmas gifts for the aging.

Here is you, Second Presbyterian, as you give money each month to a local Outreach Offering that seeks to serve the underserved and underprivileged in our community.

Here is you, Second Presbyterian as you continue to collect funds for Ukraine Relief, that to date have surpassed \$23,000.

Here is you, Second Presbyterian, as you raised 1.7 million dollars dedicated to the work of mission alone, caring for peoples' minds, bodies, and souls.

Here is my servant and... here is you!

But even though we are called to be servants of God, we must also be aware that we too are the bruised reeds, that we too are the dimly burning wicks. There are times in life when chaos is rampant, when we don't know what to do, when we are weighed down by life's burdens; times when we try and try and try, yet we feel too small to make any difference in the world, like our efforts won't change a thing. Here we must accept and acknowledge that we are no more than bruised reeds and dimly burning wicks that need help and encouragement, protection and care. For we are imperfect servants, cracked and broken.



Yet it is in our brokenness, that God and the Servant Christ are continually at work. Loving and protecting us, until our stems take root, and our flames shine bright once again.

Beloved Servants, the God who created the heavens and the earth, has breathed life into you, called you in righteousness, and has taken you by the hand. You are not alone and will never be alone. With God shining in and through our brokenness, may we join Christ in the work to open the eyes that are blinded by power, greed, and hate, release those who are imprisoned by systemic challenges of violence and discrimination, to clear out the dark prisons of poverty and inequality.

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.”

Here is my servant, and here is you!

Amen.

