

Civil Servants

Isaiah 42: 1-9

On January 9, 1861, 162 years ago tomorrow, the Union ship Star of the West was attempting to deliver troops and supplies to Fort Sumter in South Carolina. Cadets from The Citadel fired on the ship and forced it to return to New York. This was the first time gunfire erupted between Southern and Northern forces. In other words, tomorrow is the anniversary of the start of the Civil War. Now historical purists would argue with this, saying the war actually started, as most history books state, in April of 1861 when Confederate forces actually attacked Fort Sumter. But tension was already running high in January of that year. Just as Rome was not build in a day, so our Union wasn't split with a single shot. But the first shot was fired 162 years ago tomorrow.

One remarkable thing about the Civil War, besides the fact of it being the bloodiest war in our nation's history, is that both the North and the South assumed God was on their side. Both felt the Lord was speaking of them when they heard the words of Isaiah which were read today: *"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him."* The South, in particular, had some powerful and persuasive preachers who used the Bible to defend the institution of slavery. They preached that humans had no business questioning the appropriateness of slavery when it said in Ephesians, *"Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling"* (Ep 6:5); or in 1 Timothy, *"Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their masters as*

worthy of all honor” (1 Tim 6:1). Those who wanted to preserve slavery could stick with the slogan, “The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it.” Interestingly, they did not bring out this slogan to defend Jesus’ teaching of giving away everything we have to the poor and to follow him. Still, Christians in the South firmly believed that God was on their side.

Of course, preachers in the North used Scripture to espouse their cause as well. Some emphasized that the Union had to be preserved because without it the advance of liberty around the world would be slowed or even stopped – as if the gospel was about American democracy rather than the Kingdom of God. Many ministers drew on the book of Revelation to suggest that a Northern victory might, in a pre-Rapturist viewpoint, prepare the way of the second coming of Christ. Still others preached that God wouldn’t allow the North to win until it took decisive steps to end the scourge of slavery. “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” written in 1861, summed up the beliefs of the Union very well:

*In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me:
As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,
While God is marching on.*

God was on their side.

Both sides were convinced they were acting as the Lord’s servant, with God right beside them. But President Lincoln, struggling to hold the nation together, perhaps recognized

God's presence most clearly when he stated: "My concern is not whether God is on our side. My greatest concern is to be on God's side."

Are we on God's side today? That's a challenging question in our highly partisan culture. You name the issue, and God and scripture are thrown around, often carelessly, to argue one way or another – gun control, immigration, same-sex marriage, abortion, climate change. Yet this is the question the prophet Isaiah asks of us as we begin this new year. Isaiah says we will be on God's side if we act like the servant of the Lord, the one who "*will not cry or lift up his voice*" (in other words, we are civil) but instead "*will faithfully bring forth justice* (will be a servant people)." Isaiah says that those who serve the Lord have a mission to be "*a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon.*" And of course, we recall that Jesus quoted the words of Isaiah as he began his ministry according to St Luke's gospel. Isaiah proclaimed that those who do these things will always find themselves on God's side. Notice, this isn't a North or South issue; it isn't a Conservative or Liberal issue; this is not about Red states and Blue states. Wherever we find ourselves on the cultural/theological/political spectrum, we are challenged to be the Lord's servant, one who is both civil and serving. We are to be Civil Servants, if you will.

It has been a few days since we've had a mass shooting hit the headlines; but have no fear, we'll have another one soon, we all know that. We have more immigrants than ever

before trying to gain entry into the United States, fleeing desperate conditions in their own lands. The Trevor Project reveals that suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death in people between the ages of 10 and 24, and that LGBTQ people in that age group are 4 times more likely to attempt suicide than their peers. Sadly, all of these issues quickly turn into political fodder; meaning, nothing gets done. Do we as disciples of Jesus Christ have anything to offer the world in light of these situations? Do we dare to give voice, publicly, to the truth – to call a spade a spade – and acknowledge the fact that a large percentage of Americans today are more filled and shaped by hate and fear than we are by the love and hope of Jesus Christ? Dr Martin Luther King, Jr., said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness – only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate – only love can do that.” Dr King said that. Can we? Will we?

One of the reasons I am standing in the pulpit today is because of the challenge facing St Johns. We are down to one Pastor. And Pastor Christine cannot be available 24/7/365. We do not have a Christian Education director. We do not have a handbell director. I trust we are all holding the members of Council and our staff in prayer as we discern the best path forward. What does civil servanthood mean now in the life of St Johns? It would be so easy to fall into the passive mode of thinking that we pay a Pastor to do the work of the congregation. Or to assume that Caring Ministry, or some other committee, will take care of this and that. We just need to attend somewhat regularly on Sundays and bump up our pledge for the new year. But Isaiah’s message is quite clear: all the

people of God are called to be civil servants. Each of us have different gifts and abilities. But the challenge is what we are, or are not, doing with them. You may not be called to stand up here and deliver a sermon, and that is totally legit. But maybe you are called to serve as a lector or worship assistant or help with Altar Care. You may not be a Pavarotti, but you could contribute joyfully to the choir, or ring with the Bells. Maybe it is assisting when we serve at Community Table. Maybe it is joining together with JONAH to address issues of justice in our larger community. Maybe it is knitting hats for Sojourner House or making quilts for victims of disasters. Maybe it is stepping forth to help with a children's Sunday school class, or VBS, a youth mission trip, or being a confirmation mentor. Maybe it's getting to a city council meeting to advocate for the homeless on our streets and for low-income housing, or going to the school board to advocate for the safety of all our kids. Could Pastor Christine do these types of things? Yes, she could, and she does. But can she do them all by herself, at the same time? Absolutely not. So, how does the vital ministry work of St Johns get done? Of civil servants Isaiah says this: *"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 (all very civil); he will faithfully bring forth justice (a servant of the Lord)."* God's servants bring light into darkness and help people see new ways of living together. They respect other people. They work for the liberation of anyone who is enslaved – be it in poverty, in addiction, in loneliness, in despair, in fear, or in hopelessness. We all know that these problems are huge throughout our community, hence, it cannot just fall to a Pastor or a

committee of the church; rather, it must be the task of every member of the congregation. The servants of the Lord are constantly working to free the enslaved. We are each drops of water that are needed to collectively form a river of compassion flowing into our communities.

Many people consider Abraham Lincoln's second Inaugural Address to be his greatest speech, surpassing even the better-known Gettysburg Address. In it, he muses about the victors and the vanquished of the Civil War: "Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully." Like Protestant reformers Luther and Calvin before him, Lincoln saw prayer not as a means to change God's mind but as the means by which God seeks to change our minds and hearts. That is why Christ taught us to pray, "Thy will be done on earth (in and through us) as it is in heaven."

So here we circle back to the Civil War. We are still in the midst of a Civil War, with groups and causes of all sorts confident that God is on their side and their side only. But Isaiah declares that our battles will not be won by those who can fight harder or speak louder, but by those who serve better. On this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, when we remember that our Lord was baptized and claimed as God's Son to become a servant to

all of God's people, may we each remember our own baptism, and our own call to be disciples, the civil servants of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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