

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost: October 20, 2024

“From weak to Strong – our Savior”

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on this Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost, which is also our second week of Stewardship. This morning I would like to focus a little bit more on our Old Testament reading and how God is working within his people, before addressing the Gospel.

The central focus of the Isaiah passage (also known as the Suffering Servant poem) is to show how God works in the world by taking our worst and making it the best. In this reading we have clear examples of journeys from humiliation to exaltation, from shame to honor, from weakness to greatness.

This alteration is a recurring pattern in the ways of God throughout Scripture. God chose a humble elderly immigrant Abram and his barren wife to be the primary vehicle of God’s blessing “to all the families of the earth” in Genesis. God regularly chose the younger and less likely sibling over the usually-preferred elder brother as God’s specially chosen and exalted a servant such as Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Joseph over the other sons of Jacob, Judah over the first-born Reuben, young David over the other sons of Jesse, and then King Solomon over his older brother Adonijah.

God was in the habit of raising up the weak and unlikely to lead God’s cause against the strong. God called a humble and reluctant shepherd named Moses. God tapped Gideon, the weakest member of Israel’s weakest clan, to save Israel from its oppressors in Judges. God then appointed an insecure teenager named Jeremiah to be “a prophet to the nations”.

God called other leaders and activists for God's cause from among those whom society often considered less likely candidates on the basis of their gender or ethnicity. Examples include the Hebrew midwives in Egypt in Exodus, the Egyptian princess and daughter of Pharaoh, Moses' sister Miriam, Rahab the Canaanite prostitute, the prophet and judge Deborah, the song of Hannah and then the ultimate expression that begins the New Testament with its echo in Mary's Magnificat. These continue to testify to God's characteristic habit to use the weak in order to upend the strong.

Jesus is no stranger to his Hebrew history and he has been telling the disciples of his fate for months now. Jesus will now become the suffering servant of God, humbled on a cross and then exalted above every name. In his death and resurrection, Jesus represents the culmination of a recurring biblical pattern of God's servants moving from humiliation to exaltation.

The ministry of Jesus, like the suffering servant in Isaiah, shimmered between the unique individual, Jesus, and the community who followed Jesus. From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus was not alone. Jesus called together a community of twelve disciples, a communal re-constitution of ancient Israel's twelve-tribe community. The life and mission of this chosen and beloved community of Jesus' disciples was to reflect the life and mission of their leader and teacher.

Yet we can tell by the reactions of the disciples in our Gospel reading that they were not grasping the gravity of their vows. They were so focused on who was the greatest, and then asked to reign in heaven alongside Jesus! It must have made Jesus' head spin.

Jesus has been trying to explain what his ministry really means and what it means for himself. Like his disciples, he did not come to be served but to serve. But Jesus is more than an exemplary servant. He also came "to give his life as a ransom for many." This phrase is important for thinking about how Jesus understood his ministry. Jesus prayed that his life be spared and we often think our prayers go unanswered, yet Jesus did not

get out of the crucifixion. Rather, God answered his prayer by giving him the strength to get through it.

I also believe that the life and death of Jesus (even out of theological context) shows us our true human nature. It is so hard to receive love; we would rather sacrifice love; because love makes us vulnerable. Jesus was one who took the form of a slave himself and was obedient to the point of death on the cross through an act of love. It is no wonder the disciples are not able to understand this, as they contemplated their society's rules of power.

I want to empower you today as God has empowered all who thought they were less than. I want you to realize that you belong to a long line of those who were thought to be weak, and yet ended up strong. To all those who think they are invisible – I believe that this is something that happens when we age – understand that you are very visible to God.

God does not use the rich man until he has given up his riches. God did not use the eldest or strongest, when it was the youngest and tender ones that would listen to God's instructions. God did not use the emperors or the courts, but instead called on a very human son to show us our iniquities and then to cleanse us of them.

I ask you today, are you willing to take the cup Jesus offers you? It may not be to die on a cross or be martyred, but instead to live a life in love with all of creation and all of those around you. Paradoxically, this may be harder than martyrdom.

I advised you to look at the life of Jesus, the life and death that he so willingly offered, then ask yourself, can you look at that love? And when you do, what and where does it move you?

Again, as we prepare to move forward in ministry, as we gather our gifts for stewardship so that CTL can continue to provide servant ministry to those around us, how are you called to move forward?

When Jesus gives his life in love, he frees us not to become great as the world understands greatness, but to serve others in his Name. Let us here at Christ the Lord continue to do his ministry. Amen