

Who is Serving Who?
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(Isaiah 42:1–9 NRSV) 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, 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.

Today is the 150th anniversary of an event that changed the world.

On January 9th, 1861 the ship, *Star of the West* was sent by outgoing President James Buchanan in his attempt to deliver troops and supplies to a insignificant fort located on a small island in Charleston Harbor.

That fort, of course, becomes famous on April 12th 1861, when confederate forces attacked Fort Sumter and signaled the start of the Civil War.

But 150 years ago today, Cadets from the Citadel fired on the *Star of the West* from the Morris Island Battery as the ship attempted to send supplies to Major Robert Anderson's garrison at Fort Sumter and forced it to return to New York. The ship was hit three times.

In many ways, you could argue that this was the real first shots of the Civil War.

If you go back and read your histories of this time period you know that things were very tense as the year turned to 1861. South Carolina had withdrawn from the Union, and was quickly followed by Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and Texas.

In April, when Fort Sumter was fired upon, a total of 11 former states created the Confederate States of America.

I am fascinated by history.

I am one of those who believes that we can learn a great deal from the past and let it inform how we live today.

When I was a student at Duke I came to realize that they have one of the countries finest Civil War collections (Indiana University also has a phenomenal collection).

I have always been intrigued with the Civil War. I think that interest comes from listening to stories when I was a little boy about my dad's family who lived within earshot of Shiloh, Tennessee.

Over the next four years, our nation will commemorate, or celebrate (depending on your point of view) the major events that took place 150 years ago.

While I was at Duke, I began to research the role that the Chaplain played in the union and confederate armies. As I began reading diaries from various chaplains, one thing became very clear.

BOTH THE NORTH AND THE SOUTH BELIEVED THAT GOD WAS ON THEIR SIDE.

Both felt the Lord was speaking of them when they heard the words of Isaiah:
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. (Isaiah 42:1 NRSV)

In the South, powerful and persuasive preachers used the Bible to defend the institution of slavery.

Through a literal reading of the Bible they confidently preached that people had no business questioning the word of God when it said:

(Ephesians 6:5 NRSV) Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ;

or

(1 Timothy 6:1 NRSV) Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be blasphemed.

(Titus 2:9 NRSV) Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect

(1 Peter 2:18 NRSV) Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh.

Is it surprising that the South believed that God was on their side?

The Bible says it
I believe it
That settles it

What more needed to be said?

Preachers in the North also used the pulpit to “prove” that God was on their side.

Many emphasized that the United States was the new “Chosen nation” of God and because of that, the Union had to be preserved to honor God and to advance the Christian message throughout the world.

During a Thanksgiving sermon one preacher said:
“If America is lost, the world is lost”

I came across an interesting essay entitled “*Religion In the Civil War: The Northern Side*,” by James Howell Moorhead, Ph.D., of Princeton Theological Seminary.

Professor Moorhead suggests that the North’s enthusiasm for the war was vastly increased by sermons from Northern Protestant pulpits tying the defeat of the Confederacy with maintaining America’s example to the world of a successful democratic and Christian republic. These preachers proclaimed that if the Union failed, all hope was lost for representative government in the world.

He lists three ideals by these Northern clergymen to justify the war:

1. The idea I just shared about the USA being a light to the world
2. The idea of a northern victory being a prelude to the return of Christ using the imagery found in Revelation chapter 20
3. The end of slavery

It might be in that classic hymn that we sang earlier by Julia Ward Howe that best sums up this northern belief in Providence being on their side. In verse four we sang:

*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.

This notion of God being on our side is nothing new.

General George Washington believed that Providence was on their side:
“Providence has done much for us in this contest,”

Both sides during WW II believed that God saw their cause as just.

But maybe the most honest appraisal came from Napoleon Bonaparte when he said: “God is on the side of the large battalions.”

I think it was Abraham Lincoln’s perspective that is maybe most insightful. This President, who, as far as anyone knows, never joined a church made this comment.

“My concern is not whether God is on our side,” he said. “My greatest concern is to be on God’s side.”

Isn’t that really the issue?

Not if God is on our side, but if we are on God’s side!

So, are we?

Are we on God’s side?

In the middle of the strife and controversy that is swirling in our country and world today – are we on God’s side?

If you have your Bible with you, get it out and mark this passage!
Isaiah chapter 42.

If we want to be on God’s side:

We will be like the servant of the Lord who “will not cry or lift up his voice” but instead “will faithfully bring forth justice”.

Isaiah goes on to say 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”.

Somehow, unfortunately when we begin talking this way we quickly fall into stereotypical categories.

But this isn’t a North – South issue
Nor is it Right – Left
Blue – Red
Gay – Straight
Republican – Democrat issue

It really doesn't matter where you place yourself on the cultural-political-theological spectrum.

Wherever we are, as followers of Jesus – we are continually being challenged to find ourselves on God's side → not trying to convince God to be on our side!

We do that by being a servant.

That is the role that we are called to play as followers of Jesus.

Isaiah provides us with a wonderful description of what a servant leader should look like.

Isaiah writes: "I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations" (v. 1).

The servant is filled with God's spirit in order to bring justice to the nations.

And what does that mean?

It means that a servant leader goes out into the world to protect the rule of law, uphold human rights, deliver social justice and maintain healthy relationships.

If you have spent any time reading the Bible you know that one of the biggest concerns is for people who are often denied justice because of their lack of power — widows, orphans, resident aliens.

To be on "God's Side" means that we are all about bringing forth justice.
Seeking to bring the justice of God's kingdom into our everyday life.

If we are serious about that, then we have to go make sure that we treat people fairly → that we respect their rights → and maybe most importantly, making sure that we see them as children of God.

We must pay special attention to people who are vulnerable → people who have been marginalized.

Let me share with us a story I came across. This story comes from the Washington Post early last year. (May 19, 2010)

Jose Rosales was a devout Christian.

He sent every spare penny he made as a landscaper and handyman back to his family in Guatemala.

His family in Guatemala includes 2 sons in college and an ill mother.

He had the complete trust of the Brar family who hired him.

Last May when two armed men broke into the family's four-car garage, Rosales stood between them and the Brars.

"Get away from my brother and my mom," he is reported to have said.

Then, he decided to fight back. He jumped one of the invaders and wrested his gun away.

But the other man turned his gun on the family's mother. He threatened to kill the matriarch if Rosales didn't give the gun back. Rosales did, then the gunmen shot and killed Rosales.

"Without Jose, I firmly believe I would not be alive right now," said Robbie Brar. "In a situation where most people probably run away, not only did he not run away, but he stood strong to protect people that are not related to him. He's a guardian angel."

Brar said he plans to help Jose's family "like he helped my family. ... help his family out however we can."

That's bringing forth justice.
That is being a servant of the Lord.

If you go back to the Isaiah passage you will notice that he tells us the ways that a servant leader does their work.

"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; he will faithfully bring forth justice" (vv. 2-3)

Servants aren't loud or obnoxious,
They aren't destructive or domineering.

They do their work quietly and compassionately, with respect for the people around them, while also standing strong for what they believe in.

"He will not grow faint or be crushed," predicts Isaiah, "until he has established justice in the earth" (v. 4).

We all need to study carefully this passage.

There's a better way than waving signs and screaming insults, firing verbal arrows at those we disagree with.

True servants of the Lord always produce more light than heat.

In fact, they're sent to be:

“a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon” (vv. 6–7).

God’s servants bring light into darkness and help people see new ways of living together.

They work for the liberation of anyone who’s trapped — in poverty, in addiction, in homelessness, in loneliness, in despair.

The servant of the Lord is constantly working to free the slaves.

We have come full circle.

Today is the 150th anniversary of the first shots fired in what became our Civil War. A war that ultimately came to be about slavery.

While that war is over – we are still fighting many issues today.

And when all is said and done → the way out of this war isn’t by fighting harder, but learning to serve better.

John Wesley once remarked:

“One of the principle rules of religion is to lose no occasion of serving God. And since [God] is invisible to our eyes, we are to serve [God] in our neighbor; which [the Lord] receives as if done to [Godself] in person, standing visibly before us.”