Year A, Second Sunday after Epiphany. Isaiah 49:1-7

The Calling from God – A purpose given; not made

In the Church we observed last Sunday as the Baptism of Our Lord, and we reflected on not only Jesus’ baptism, but on baptism as the beginning of our lifelong vocation as Christians. It is fitting, then, that the focus of today’s lectionary texts is God’s call to us; that is, the working out in our lives of that which was begun in our baptism.

In my own life, the movement from baptism to following God’s call in my life was not so direct. Last week Rev. Brian Wilbert asked who among us could remember our baptisms, and I am definitely among those who cannot. I was baptized when I was a baby, and grew up believing in God, but after I graduated from high school I stopped participating in the life of the Church for about a decade. There is no simple, single answer for why I felt little interested in God or church for those years. Part of it has to do with the need to find my own sense of self, apart from the identity and ideals put upon me by my parents and by the Catholic school system I grew up in. Another part of it was some of what I would hear from my dad. He would say, for example, that going to church is just about learning to be a good person. That stuck with me, and I began to think that if God, religion, church, the Sacraments, and all the rest of it just boils down to 100 different ways to say “Do unto others,” then I got it already! Just be a good person, got it. No need to keep setting in a pew every week for that! I felt that I had learned the lesson they were trying to teach, and I was ready to graduate from church!
It wasn’t until a decade later that I met Zeke Coughlin, an Episcopal priest who helped show me that our faith is not a mere moral code, nor a list of “dos and don’ts.” He helped me to see that being Christian is a vocation that takes our whole lives and whole person; body, mind, and soul. Christianity is a journey into the very Heart of God – the God who made each of us with a purpose. Our existence is not mere happenstance! When I began to understand that, I began to take my baptism seriously for the first time in my adult life.

This view that God made us for a reason and that we are all here for a higher purpose is presented in today’s passage from Chapter 49 of Isaiah. “The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother’s womb he named me.” Speaking as broadly as possible, the largest change for me in returning to my practice of the Christian faith was moving from a view of meaning as something that is entirely created by us, to something that is given by God. All people are involved in the project of making meaning out of their own lives, but I found that if I were the source of all of the meaning I create for my own life, then ultimately that meaning I create is hollow. As Christians, our true selves are not found in relationship to anything that is relative, or changing. Ultimately, all my relative relationships and identities, as son, brother, friend, curate; all of those are real and true in their own right, but they are all grounded in that which is passing away. Even our own bodies are passing away. But our relationship to God, the One who created all that is and without whom not one thing came into being, THAT relationship is not relative, but absolute. This is why our God given purpose goes beyond all of the other self made purposes, identities, and meanings that we create for our lives.
Returning to the text, the character we hear in our passage from Isaiah is one known as the “suffering servant.” In the passage the servant is identified as “Israel,” that is to say the whole body of the faithful. However, Biblical scholars believe that there is evidence that this identification as “Israel” was a later addition, and that it is likely that the suffering servant was originally meant to identify a particular person. Christian theologians throughout history have seen this text pointing forward to Jesus, and the one who suffers for the sake of the world. In interpreting this text for our time as people of faith, we understand the servant as both faithful individual as well as believing community.

And it is this suffering servant, very much in the dual role of individual believer as well as community, who recognizes that God has called them from before their birth and has a special purpose for their lives. But something interesting happens in the 4th verse; it is here that the suffering servant reveals how aware they are of their own waywardness. Verse 4 begins, “But I said, ‘I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.’” The suffering servant knows that they have been wasteful in how they have used the time, talent, and treasure given them by God. The suffering servant is well aware that they have not always lived into the purpose that God had for them.

But God’s response is surprising and generous! God does not berate the servant for failures, nor does God reassess the servant’s role and assign some reduced or diminished calling given the servant’s inadequacies, perceived or real. God actually expands the servant’s role beyond its original scope.
“It is **too light a thing** that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”

God’s purpose for the both the servant and for the world has been revealed to be broader than what the servant originally understood.

Just as God knew, named, and had a plan for the suffering servant before they were born, so God knew each of us. The work of the suffering servant, bearing the pain of the world so that God’s light and love may be made known to all people is a vocation to which we are called to share. As we see from God in this text, God’s plan of salvation cannot be limited. It is not limited to our church, or our family, or our nation, or any other place where we might feel compelled to draw a boundary, for the salvation of God reaches to the ends of the earth!

As you go forth from this place today reflecting on and praying with this passage from Isaiah, know these things for sure. Know that you are wonderfully made, and known to God before you were born. Know that you are here for a purpose, a purpose that is given, not made. Know that God works in and through what you perceive to be failures or inadequacies in your own life. Know that God’s salvation is for you and for all, to the ends of the earth. And above all, know that you are loved. Amen.