

“I am Here! Now What?”

Isaiah 49:1-7

Last week we talked about being baptized and how we are called to discover our vocation to serve God's world. So, as we discover our calling and know our deepest joy in life, how does that translate into the life of a congregation? I am here in church, now what? As we ponder this question, let's listen to some thoughts from two church members.

ROULA: Today, I am an average church member. I joined this church recently. I have been looking for a church home for a couple of years, but finally I know that this will be my church home. Now that I am here, I can really find rest for my soul. I am so busy every day with work, family and responsibilities. It will be great to get away from it all and just rest in God's arms.

PROPHET: Today, I am a modern day prophet. I feel so restless about so many issues in the world. I only find rest in joining God's action in the world. Poverty is such an epidemic in our world. We have all this technology and wealth, yet there are so many people who can't afford the basics of life.

ROULA: My soul has been weary the last few years. I have felt so disconnected from life. I am really looking forward to having a community in my life that knows about prayer and faith. I need that so much in my life.

PROPHET: What bothers me the most is when people seem to not care about the pain of the world or when they make excuses for not doing anything about it. Maybe they just feel so helpless or maybe they think that faith is all about their needs in life and not about service.

ROULA: I am so glad that there are people in the church like Ann Emmans. She plays such beautiful music that lets us go straight into the presence of God.

PROPHET: But I am so glad that there are people in the church who care about justice for all and who work hard to feed the hungry and advocate for those who are oppressed. Tomorrow we remember one of them, Martin Luther King, Jr. who worked for justice and challenged our racist systems.

ROULA: I am thankful for people in the church who care for the sick and those who are homebound to nurture their souls. Donna Blake and the care ministry team visit people in their homes, praying for them and even taking communion to them.

PROPHET: I am thankful for people like Dorothy Day who started the Catholic worker movement. Dorothy chose to live in poverty herself and opened her home to the poor, but she also created a whole movement among Christians to advocate for justice for the poor. She didn't just settle for simple acts of charity without doing the hard work of justice.

ROULA: I am thankful for people who have already reached out to me to include me in a Bible study group to help my faith to grow. My husband even went to the men's breakfast and they welcomed him. I know that this will be an important part of our faith journey. I know that God is calling me to grow spiritually.

PROPHET: I hope that we will always think about God's world and never be content to only look at our own needs and comforts. There is too much suffering in the world and I know that God is calling us to be involved in the struggle for justice.

ROULA: Growing in our own faith and being part of the struggle for justice are not opposites. They are two sides of the same coin. Our Bible reading from Isaiah 49 calls the people of faith to love God and to serve God's world. The people of Israel that the prophet was addressing were living in exile in the sixth century B.C.E. They had lost hope in God and in life. They saw that life was not fair. They had to be uprooted and become refugees in Babylon. They lost their traditions, their money, and even their temple religion. They had to live under the mercy of their enemies. God seemed so far away in those times. But the prophet reminded them that God was intimately involved in their lives. God was even there before they were born. Yet, God was

calling them not just for their own sake. God was calling them into a relationship that will lead them to serving “the nations,” so that God’s salvation will “reach to the end of the earth.” God’s covenant with the people of Israel was always about a calling to serve others. They were blessed so that they may be a blessing to others. In the same way our spiritual growth is not a goal in and of itself. Most people I know who truly grow in their faith learn how to let go and become stronger servants. God transforms us so that we can grow to the place of saying: Life is not about me, I am about life. The world is not here to serve me, I am here to serve the world. This is not a bad thing. It is the source of deep meaning and joy. Father Richard Rohr wrote in his book “Everything Belongs” that “The primary philosophical and spiritual problem in the West is the lie of individualism. Individualism makes church almost impossible... I need to recognize that I’m in a river that is bigger than I am. The foundation and the flow of that river is love. Life is not about me; it is about God, and God is about love.”

Christian Spahn wrote, “One cannot truly know God and self in the silence of personal prayer without also knowing God and self in the suffering and anguish and despair of humanity and our violated earth. The only appropriate response to such knowing is involvement.”

Last week we talked about the blessing of our baptism as a starting point for our vocation in life for our special way of serving God in the world. This week, we are actually looking at almost the same idea with adding the element of community to it. How do we as the people of God gathered here not only learn how to grow spiritually and also learn how to serve God and others faithfully? How do we live faithfully to this calling? I believe that there are at least two points for us from our Bible reading: One is that we don’t need to worry about getting all of our faith and life in order before we serve. The people of Israel certainly were in no great shape to serve others while they were refugees. God calls us just as we are and wherever we are in life. This church has known that for years. You have not waited until the budget is balanced before we give to others. Most of you here have your own struggles in life, yet you don’t let that stop you from serving others.

The second point is that God is concerned about all of God’s creation. God is intimately involved in our world to bring light to those painful places in our world. Our walk with God is not just in our times of prayer, worship and singing. It is also in times when we join God in working for justice for all who struggle. The Church of Jesus Christ does not exist for itself so that we can be only a great group of people who help and support each other. We are here together to grow in our faith and to serve God in the world.

Bono the lead singer of U2, which is a famous rock band is a modern day prophet organizing communities and people to do justice in the world. In 2006 he was invited to be the speaker for the National Prayer Breakfast at the White House. Here is what he shared:

“A number of years ago, I met a wise man who changed my life. In countless ways, large and small, I was always seeking the Lord's blessing. I was saying, you know, I have a new song, look after it? I have a family, please look after them? I have this crazy idea... And this wise man said: Stop. He said, ‘stop asking God to bless what you're doing. Get involved in what God is doing - because it's already blessed.’ Well, God, as I said, is with the poor. That, I believe, is what God is doing. And that is what God's calling us to do.”

“I was amazed when I first got to this country and I learned how much some churchgoers tithe - up to 10% of the family budget. Well, how does that compare with the federal budget, the budget for the entire American family? How much of that goes to the poorest of the poor in the world? Less than 1%.”
“It’s not about charity, it’s about justice. And that’s too bad. Because you’re good at charity. Americans, like the Irish, are good at it. We like to give, and we give a lot, even those who can’t afford it. But justice is a higher standard. Africa makes a fool of our idea of justice; it makes a farce of our idea of equality. It mocks our pieties, it doubts our concern, it questions our commitment. Sixty-five hundred (6,500) Africans are still dying every day of a preventable, treatable disease, for lack of drugs we can buy at any drug store. This is not about charity, this is about Justice and Equality.”

Bono and his band are committed to ending Third World debt and the plight of poverty and disease in Africa. Bono founded DATA in 2002 along with activists from the Jubilee 2000 Drop the Debt campaign. DATA stands for Debt, AIDS, Trade, and Africa. At the core of DATA's mission is a view that these issues are not about charity, but about equality and justice. Bono has been highly active in campaigning for Africa. He visited Ghana, South Africa, Uganda and Ethiopia with U.S. Treasury

Secretary Paul O'Neill in May 2002 and has continued his work through DATA with the support of several world leaders and financial backing from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Today as you think about your calling and vocation to serve God, you may want to use the faith in action piece in your bulletin. Also, please remember there is a meeting for the mission team to continue to discern together where God is calling us to act in the world. I hope that you will be able to join us to pray about this because our calling to join God in the struggle for justice is not easy.

I would like to end with a poem about God's involvement in our world. The poem is by Madeleine L'Engle:

“God did not wait till the world was ready, till nations were at peace.
God came when the Heavens were unsteady, and prisoners cried out for release.
God did not wait for the perfect time.
God came when the need was deep and great.
God dined with sinners in all their grime,
Turned water into wine.
God did not wait till hearts were pure.
In joy God came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame God came
And God's light would not go out.
God came to a world which did not mesh
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
The Maker of the stars was born.
We cannot wait till the world is sane
To raise our songs with joyful voice,
For to share our grief, to touch our pain,
God came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!
Amen.