

Christ the Servant
Isaiah 42,49,50

Turn to Isaiah 42 please. In the first half of Isaiah we meet Christ the King. The government will rest on his shoulders, and he will rule on David's throne forever. Much of that has not happened yet. We will see that side of Christ at his second coming. We serve God and wait.

The first half of Isaiah gives us the Christ of the second coming. The second half of Isaiah gives us the Christ of his first coming, the Jesus of know from the Gospels. This Christ has nothing to do with government. The world would improve hugely from a just and honest ruler like Christ. The world would be much better off with that Christ of the second coming.

But, that's not all we need. We also need someone to turn people back to God, someone who was one of us, who would bring us to God. This is Isaiah's Servant. There are four "servant songs," that's what they are called. The fourth one is the famous Isaiah 53, Jesus dying in place of guilty people. We'll save the fourth servant song for Easter.

Today we read Isaiah's first three servant songs. We'll see the Jesus we already know through different eyes, the eyes of Isaiah hundreds of years before Jesus was born.

This Servant in Isaiah 42-50 is not like Immanuel, Mighty God, Everlasting Father. This Servant is an ordinary man who is completely devoted to serving God. Nothing more or less than that. If we did not know the Jesus of the Gospels, we would not know that this was the same person as Immanuel of Isaiah 7-11. But we do have the Gospels, so we know they are the same.

First Song Isa 42:1-9 We'll begin with 42:1-4

*"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one, in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations.*

² *He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets.*

³ *A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench.
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; ⁴ he will not falter or be discouraged
till he establishes justice on earth. In his teaching the islands will put their hope."*

He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. He will not be noisy, not trying to be the center, not trying to take charge, he's quiet, gentle, doing his work without fuss.

A bruised reed he will not break, a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. No one is too broken, no one is too feeble. He will not quit on the broken and hopeless, he will be gentle with the people who are staggering and defeated. Sound like Jesus?

He himself will not falter or be discouraged until he establishes justice on earth. He will have his reasons to falter and be discouraged, he will have his own reasons to stagger and feel defeated, but he will stay faithful, he will not quit until the earth is a just place.

In his teaching the islands will put their hope. In Isaiah “islands” means “remote countries,” “isolated peoples.” What will the Servant do, the chosen one with the Spirit on him? He will teach. In his teaching the islands will put their hope. (“law” here, *torah*, should be “teaching.”)

That was God introducing his servant, who will gently teach and be faithful and bring justice. Now, in vv5-9, God speaks directly to the servant. Imagine Jesus reading all of this at the start of his ministry and figuring out how God wanted him to live. God speaking to Jesus:

God promises to help and use the Servant – 42:5-9

⁵ *This is what God the Lord says—the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it:*

⁶ *“I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand.*

I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles,

⁷ *to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison, and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.* ⁸ *“I am the Lord; that is my name! I will not yield my glory to another, or my*

praise to idols. ⁹ *See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare; before they spring into being I announce them to you.”*

God the Creator says the very same things to the Servant that he says to us: “I have called you, I will take hold of your hand, I will keep you, I will make you to be what you should be.” For the Servant to succeed, God the Creator must call him, hold him, keep him. This God will do. This is how Jesus accomplished what he did when he was on earth: God held his hand and kept him.

To open the eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and dark dungeons. This is mostly spiritual blindness, captives in spiritual prisons, in dark spiritual dungeons. People who are far from God, and far from hope, and trapped in their dark, frightened, angry, sinful, confused lives.

That’s where my ancestors were when Isaiah wrote this. Jesus the gentle teacher changed everything. Now we have seen the light of the gospel, and we are in covenant with God. Wow, God, thanks! And notice that the real power behind this light and freedom is God himself, God honouring his good Name by giving light to Gentiles. This is God’s assurance to the Servant.

Second Song Isa 49:1-13 This song is the Servant speaking to the world.

49:1-4 *Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations:*

Before I was born, the Lord called me; from my mother’s womb, he has spoken my name.

² *He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver.*

³ *He said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor.”*

⁴ *But I said, “I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing at all. Yet what is due me is in the Lord’s hand, and my reward is with my God.”*

I am going to read this again, and look for a contrast between revealed and hidden in each line. This contrast happens four times. Each line shows first revealed, then hidden.

49:1b *Before I was born the Lord called me; from my mother’s womb he has spoken my name.*

² *He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow, and concealed me in his quiver.*

³ *He said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor.”*

⁴ *But I said, “I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing at all.*

“The Lord called me openly, made my mouth like a sharpened sword, made me a polished arrow, and showed his splendor in me! And then God hid me, made me hard to find.” Jesus was the most amazing person ever, and also hidden. During his life few people took him seriously.

49:4 *I said, “I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing at all.* Imagine Jesus saying, “I’m doing my best at this, Father, but it is not working, it’s not doing any good.” I’ll bet some of you have felt like that. “I’m trying my best at this Father, but it is useless, it makes no difference.” Servant: *I have labored in vain; I spent my strength for nothing at all.*

But where does he go from there? Faith. 49:4b “*Yet what is due me is in the Lord’s hand, and my reward is with my God.*” After we say, “I’m doing my best, Father, but it makes no difference,” then we say, *what is due me is in the Lord’s hand, and my reward is with my God.*

49:5 *And now the Lord says [to me, the Servant]—he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the Lord and my God has been my strength—⁶ he says: “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may be my salvation to the ends of the earth.”*

The Servant will bring the tribes of Jacob back to God, and he will also be salvation for the Gentiles. How will he get this done? His great power? No: *my God has been my strength.* Remember Isa 40? *Those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength.* The Servant’s life.

⁷ *This is what the Lord says—the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel—to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation, to the servant of rulers: “Kings will see you and stand up, princes will see and bow down, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”*

The Servant was despised and abhorred by all kinds of people, and rulers did whatever they wanted to him. We know this story from the Gospels. But that will yet change: *Kings will see you and stand up, princes will see and bow down.*

⁸ *This is what the Lord says: “In the time of my favor I will answer you, and in the day of salvation I will help you; I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people, to restore the land and to reassign its desolate inheritances,*

Jesus the Servant did not get his prayers answered right away. He had to wait, he’s still waiting for some. God answered the Servant when the time was right. In the meantime, God kept him. *In the time of my favor [when the time is right], I will answer you, and in the day of salvation I will help you; I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people.*

And now God describes the result of all this, the success of the Servant:

49:9 *[God will] say to the captives, ‘Come out,’ and to those in darkness, ‘Be free!’*

“They will feed beside the roads and find pasture on every barren hill.

¹⁰ *They will neither hunger nor thirst, nor will the desert heat or the sun beat down on them.*

He who has compassion on them will guide them and lead them beside springs of water.

¹¹ *I will turn all my mountains into roads, and my highways will be raised up.*

¹² *See, they will come from afar—some from the north, some from the west, some from Aswan.”*

¹³ *Shout for joy, you heavens; rejoice, you earth; burst into song, you mountains!*

For the Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.

That’s where this ends: Wow, God! Thanks! The second half of Isaiah began this way: *“Comfort, comfort my people, speak tenderly to Jerusalem.”* That’s going on until the end of Isaiah. God wants so much to comfort his people and have compassion on his troubled ones. That’s where the Servant’s work ends up. Heaven and earth and mountains will shout, rejoice, and sing!

49:13 *Shout for joy, you heavens; rejoice, you earth; burst into song, you mountains!*

For the Lord comforts his people, and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.

Third Song Isa 50:4-11

50:4 *The Sovereign Lord has given me a well-instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed.* The Servant, Jesus, is getting daily instructions from the Sovereign Lord. The Sovereign God wakes the Servant each morning to pray and ask for guidance.

In particular, what is the Servant learning? “The word that sustains the weary.” The Sovereign Lord tells the Servant what to say to the weary, the faltering, the discouraged, the stumbling.

God educates the Servant, so Servant knows what to say to help these weary people along. *The Sovereign Lord has given me a well-instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed.*

And in 50:5 we go to Jesus at his trial and crucifixion: ⁵ *The Sovereign Lord has opened my ears; I have not been rebellious, I have not turned away.* [In Gethsemane this was a fight, but Jesus did not rebel against God, he did not turn away from God’s will.]

⁶ *I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.* ⁷ *Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame.* ⁸ *He who vindicates me is near.*

The Servant does not look forward to being beaten and mocked and humiliated. But he sets his face like flint, unmovable. He is determined to do what he must do. In Luke’s Gospel, already in Luke 9 Jesus began his long final trip to Jerusalem, to teach and be arrested and crucified and raised. Other Gospels don’t tell it quite like that.

Here’s how Luke begins that trip (Luke 9:51-3): When it was time for Jesus to be taken up, he placed his face to go to Jerusalem. He sent messengers before his face. When the Samaritan village saw that his face was going to Jerusalem, they would not let Jesus say there.

In Isaiah the Servant says: *I have set my face like a flint.* Luke does not quote Isa 50:7, but he describes Jesus deciding to go to Jerusalem by emphasizing “face,” and Luke assumes we know this servant song, and that we can’t miss the connection.

50:7b *I know I will not be put to shame.* ⁸ *He who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges against me? Let us face each other! Who is my accuser? Let him confront me!* ⁹ *It is the Sovereign Lord who helps me. Who will condemn me? They will all wear out like a garment; the moths will eat them up.*

Conclusion: This third song ends with a straightforward call.

¹⁰ *Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the word of his Servant? Let the one who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and rely on their God.*

¹¹ *But now, all you who light fires and provide yourselves with flaming torches, go, walk in the light of your fires and of the torches you have set ablaze. This is what you shall receive from my hand: You will lie down in torment.*

Back in Isa 8, God gave Isaiah a strong warning: “Isaiah, do not fear what these people fear, and do not live in their ways; I am holy, I will be your fear, I will be your dread.” And Isaiah responded, “I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face, I will put my trust in him.”

That is God's call to everyone who has listened to his Servant, which we have: *Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the word of his Servant? Let the one who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and rely on their God.*

The other option is to be like Ahaz. Two kings had scared him badly, and instead of trusting in God, waiting on the Lord, Ahaz made a deal with an evil power to take care of him. In Isaiah 50, that's called lighting fires for yourselves.

V11 But now, all you who [like king Ahaz] light fires and provide yourselves with flaming torches, go, walk in the light of your fires and of the torches you have set ablaze. This is what you shall receive from my hand: You will lie down in torment.

We meet here every Sunday because we have already decided not to be like Ahaz. We have heard from Jesus the Servant, and we are persuaded, we have decided to obey him, we have decided together to trust in the name of the Lord, and to rely on our God. That's what brings us together.

This ending is God urging us again, "don't give up on this, I sent my Servant to gather you and others just like you, keep obeying him, keep putting your trust in me."

This is the third Sunday of Advent. Today, we celebrate the Jesus that has come. We have the remarkable privilege of reading Isaiah's servant songs, written hundreds of years before Jesus of Nazareth was born, and we know the Gospels, and we know that Jesus lived out just what Isaiah prophesied. God has done just what he said. Wow, God; thanks. Let us trust in him.

Prayer: God, these prophecies astonished me this week, the prophecy you gave Isaiah, and the Servant you sent to sustain the weary, and comfort the afflicted. Thank you for wanting to comfort us, encourage us, to take care of the broken and hopeless. Thank you. Thank you for doing in Jesus just what you told Isaiah long before that you would do. You keep old promises. Thank you for making our Champion someone who knows what life is like. Help us trust in you, help us always rely on you. Lead us away from lighting our own fires and setting up our own torches. Guard us and keep us and strengthen us. Guide us, lead us away from temptation, be our shepherd and always lead us on the right path, for your name's sake. Amen.

Footnote: In 49:3 God calls the Servant "Israel." In other places "Israel" means the nation. Why does God call the Servant "Israel"? Remember that before "Israel" was the name of a nation, it was the name of a man, Jacob, named Israel by God after Jacob wrestled all night (Gen 32). At that point, the promise to Abraham, the blessing to all the nations rested on one man, Jacob, Israel. It seems best to see God calling the Servant "Israel" in that sense. This is not the only explanation, but the one that makes the most sense to me.