

Dear Future Me: God Favors You!

A sermon based on Isaiah 42:1-7 - ***“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 snuff out.**

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.”**

**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.**

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My daughter misbehaves and disobeys. There, I said it! Oh, you’re not surprised. But you know there’s a stigma attached to PK’s – to pastor’s kids – don’t you? That they’re usually the worst of the bunch – the worst behaved...although I think you would agree, Gabriella is pretty much an angel...ha!

No, it’s not that? You’re not surprised because I’m guessing that describes your kids as well. I’ve seen some well-mannered kids. I’ve seen some well-behaved kids. I’ve seen well-intentioned kids. I’ve never seen a perfect child. Never.

And you know that. You were once a child yourself. You’d have to be blind not to see the sinful nature displayed in any child. And yet, what’s the truth? No matter how naughty, no matter how often your

children misbehave and disobey, no matter how unloving they can be at times...you never stop loving them.

And what a joy it was for Isaiah to ultimately convey that message of love to the Israelites. Right, remember last week, we touched on the no-so-great message of God's future judgment and punishment God had Isaiah preach to the Israelites in their wickedness and sin? I mean, who ever wants to be the bad guy, the bearer of bad news, the one handing out the punishment? Parents don't ever want to – that's why they call it tough love. I doubt Isaiah was thrilled with the task. But he did, and what made it easier was what followed that harsh news...God's promise of future grace...in the form of God returning to his people and God returning his people to their homes in Jerusalem.

But here's what made him even more joyful...verses like ours today, which focused on a different kind of future grace, which God would one day show through his servant – the Servant of the Lord...the servant who would bring God's favor to the Israelites and us today.

Which, for us, is pure grace, nothing but God's undeserved love. You know why, don't you?

Well, we're not as bad as the Israelites were in Isaiah's time, wouldn't you agree? I mean, they were stooped in constant, repulsive idolatry – worshipping their statues and false gods...in the face of God, who had been so very active and so very kind in their lives. They looked to and depended on their kings and foreign alliances – not God – for protection, peace, and stability. And, even when they did worship God, it was mostly formalistic, as in, they simply went through the motions. Their wickedness was to the point where, at the beginning of Isaiah, God said of them, ***"Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted. From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness" (Isaiah 1:5,6).*** In today's lingo, you might say "they were all kinds of messed up."

But, that's kind of the problem with us, too, isn't it? If we look at the Israelites of old and conclude, "We're nowhere near as bad and as sinful and as wicked as those people," then that's the problem. We're the problem...because we are just as bad.

We all have – or have had – our own idols...what pushes God off the top pedestal from time to time...what becomes more important than God (which includes obeying God, serving God, worshipping God, studying about God)...things like money, family, my job, fishing, camping, clothes, football, sleep, video games, friends, my own wants and desires...even my own pet sins. They're not necessarily material idols we bow down to and worship, but they are idols the same.

Or, who here is guiltless when it comes to your worship...who can say, "I've always given 100% of my focus only to God when I'm here. I've never let my mind wander during Pastor's sermon, never started to nod off, never started writing weekly notes for myself on the guest cards. I've never had a mental list of people I couldn't truly forgive – even as I was asking God to forgive me during confession and absolution. I've never once failed to give my offering, or at least to do it with the attitude God wants me to have"? I can't say that.

Who would have to admit, "I probably get more hung up on politics today than I should, where what's going on, in our government, on the world scene...it has me scared, anxious, angry. As the world goes, so I go" ...as opposed to, "God is in control...always. It doesn't matter who's leading because Jesus is King"? Do you have a hard time actually trusting that...always?

We're not different. Our sins might take on a slightly different form, but that's doesn't make us better.

You know, Mara's at the age where she's deciding more what she likes...and especially what she doesn't like, saying, "I hate this." Well, what we're teaching Mara as an alternative to "I hate" is "this is not my favorite." Isn't that what God would have to say about you and me? "You don't trust me and worship me and love me with all your heart...with your entire life. In fact, you've done some pretty nasty things to me, your heavenly Father. You are not my favorite. You are not worthy of my favor. You are not worthy of my love. You are not worthy of me."

That's a bit harsh, yet it's exactly what God should say to us. And, honestly, he shouldn't stop there. What he really ought to say is, "I hate you. Get out of my sight. Go to hell."

And, while he should – and has every right to – say that to us, he doesn't. Instead, our verses describe what God does say to us. He says, ***"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight."*** "In whom I delight." You see, God has never stopped loving you and me, his wayward children. Instead, God delights in you. God favors you. You are God's favorite. He is pleased with you.

Why? Why would God favor you and me...when we have disappointed, and have angered, and have saddened him by sinning against him...too many times?

It's because of this servant whom Isaiah talks about here. Any idea who he is? Well, what does God say of him? Again, ***"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."*** Do you see any connections to our Gospel? Jesus baptized, and the Spirit descended on him, and what did God say? ***"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased"*** (Matthew 3:17). The Servant is Jesus.

You see, the word for "servant" here, it refers not so much to a slave but rather someone who's a trusted envoy or confidential representative. In Jesus, God entrusted work he knew only Jesus could carry out...which was to bring justice.

And we hear that, and maybe we start to shake a little because we think of people who are brought to justice, who are punished in a way fitting to their crime. And God did that...just not to us.

The Servant brought God's justice to the nations not in the way we would expect. You know, Isaiah does a bit of a contrast here...where we would expect justice to be carried out with a show of strength and arrogance and belittling and crushing enemies into submission, that wasn't Jesus.

Now, this Servant takes note of these bruised reeds. He takes note of the bruised and timid conscience. He knows us, how weak we are, stumbling under the weight of God's standard of perfection. He knows us – the regret and shame over sins we carry. He knows our utter inability to change our eternal future on our own...or at all. And so, instead of shouting at us or speaking condescendingly to us, he speaks tenderly, announcing our sins have been paid for.

The Servant observes people who are smoldering, their faith no more than a spark about to go out. He sees those who think only they are nearly overcome with despair. He gathers all of them in his arms and carries them close to his heart.

But best of all, the Servant brought God's justice to the nations and carried it out as he carried his cross and justified the nations by dying for the sins of the world.

His justice was righteousness. His ministry was characterized by an relentless driving toward his goal...to make us forever right with God. He did not falter in the work for which he was anointed - at his baptism - until he brought forth the right verdict the justice that comes from God and declares his people righteous in his sight because of Messiah's work – his life, death, and resurrection.

We were blind, we were captive, we were in darkness – all phrases we've recently used to describe our poor condition, and Jesus brought us justice...God's justice...God's favor poured out on us...because his work pleased and delighted his Father.

Which now describes the way our heavenly Father looks at us and sees us. He's pleased and delighted in you. Do you know where you can find your assurance of that? Like, in a year, when you might be filled with regrets or guilt or shame when faced with your mistakes, your failures, your sins, and you feel unforgivable, where can you/will you go for assurance of God's favor for you?

Um, not too far. Take a look towards the front. What do you see? The baptismal font. Do you remember when you were baptized? Not, do you remember the exact moment (especially if you were baptized as an infant). But, do you remember when...the date...that day when God brought you and through the water and the Word made you his dearly loved child....a member of his heavenly family? April 21, 1985. That's my 2nd birthday. What's yours?

More importantly, can you remember, from here on out, that you are baptized? Can that become a daily keepsake for you, to wake up every morning remembering, "I am a baptized child of God"? Because what does that mean? Baptism doesn't promise a perfect life. It's not this magical cloak of protection draped over you...where now, you're impervious to sin...because you're not. But God wants your baptism to be the constant, daily reminder that even amidst all your sinful disappointments, your Father still loves you. He's still chosen you to be his own child. He still delights in you. He still favors you. You're his favorite (well, we all are) because of Jesus – the Servant, whose blood on the cross washed you clean, and so the waters of baptism washed you clean.

Jesus' blood is our insurance. Baptism is our assurance. And that's what I'd like to challenge you to write to yourself about in this week's "Dear Future Me..." letter. First, I want you to do some digging to find your baptism date. But more importantly, I want you to share with yourself some of the regrets you're still carrying around right now – specific disappointments to your heavenly Father – yet how your baptism assures you justice and righteousness with God is yours. And, again, write about it!

Here's something I found online from another pastor...**I have brought infants, and toddlers, and teenagers, [and even adults] to the waters of baptism again and again because what God does through the Spirit is the most wonderfully disruptive thing that can ever take place. In those moments, God speaks from the torn open heavens, just like on the day Jesus was baptized to say, "You are my child." And we are who God says we are.**

You are who God says you are. You are his child. He favors you. Amen.

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