

THE SERVANT

ISAIAH 42:1-9

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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I am losing count of the number of times over the past few weeks when I have heard something to the effect of, “I’m so glad that 2016 is over! I’m ready for a new and better year!”

For some, 2016 was a very difficult year personally. Perhaps it was a health crisis, or the breakdown of a relationship, or the loss of a job, or the challenges of dislocation and starting over in a strange land with new rules and different customs, and the pain of leaving behind family and friends and all that is familiar, as is the case for our Syrian friends.

2016 was a difficult year to read the news. It was a year of economic doom and gloom, of Brexit, of global crises producing mass movements of refugees, of isolated events of terror throughout Europe and America and around the world.

And, of course, 2016 will also be remembered as the year that brought us Donald Trump as president of the United States.

It was in many ways a crazy year where politics morphed into theatre, where journalism devolved into the crassest forms of entertainment, and where once admired virtues of civility, truth-telling, moral character, and transparency were often treated as little more than speed bumps on the superhighway to superpower.

2016 may well be remembered as the year when the shape of our cultural discourse made a pronounced turn toward the vulgar, the reactionary and emotive. It was the year where the term “post-truth” was added to our dictionary, the year where power

games and crude rhetoric seemed dramatically more compelling and persuasive than what was actually true.

And then we could talk about the church. 2016 brought news of reeling institutions. At our National Assembly last summer, we discussed some contentious ethical issues and how all of these issues are intertwined with larger questions about the Mennonite church and where it's going.

The Future Directions Task Force was given the unenviable task of charting a course forward in light of shrinking national budgets and decreased connection and allegiance to things like national and provincial institutions.

We look ahead to the future of these institutions that once were stable and strong and we're not sure what to expect. What will hold us together in the midst of our undeniable theological diversity? What role will these institutions play in a cultural context defined by individualism and consumerism and the loosening of community bonds? What structures will serve the church well going forward?

(We're going to be talking about some of these ways forward with some young adults from the "Emerging Voices Initiative" next Sunday morning during the Sunday School hour.)

There are other stories, too. I'm sure there were good things about 2016, even though these things rarely make the headlines. But I know that from personal stories to the events that dominated the headlines, 2016 was a tough year for many.

And so, in light of all these things, the question occurred to me: **What will make 2017 better than 2016?**

In many cases—not *all* cases, but *many*—we have little to no control over the things that made 2016 bad.

We have little control over the misfortunes that befall us on a personal level. We can't control when illness or suffering will strike, when loved ones will die.

We don't have much personal control over the economy and how it affects us.

We are relatively powerless when it comes to massive cultural trends that shape our lives and mold our discourse. We can and must always strive to model a better way, but it's hard to turn around a ship this big.

We can't do much about a collective future that seems destined to be defined by the immediate, the entertaining, the powerful, and the reactionary, the crude and vulgar.

We can't control things as big as war or refugee crises or global terror or a Donald Trump presidency. Obviously.

So what do we do? In light of all that was bad in 2016 (and long before that!), in light of all that could potentially cause us anxiety going into 2017, what ought our response to look like? As individuals? As a church?

It seems to me that, broadly speaking, we have two options.

The first is to respond to all these real or imagined threats by looking for a resolute and determined display of force.

While I was waiting in the dentists' office this week, I happened upon an article in Macleans magazine called, "The Dawn of the Strongman Era is Here."¹ Referring to leaders like Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin and the gradual shift in Europe to far-right political leaders, the author says there is a noticeable "shift away from international laws toward the situational ethics of raw power."

This approach looks and sounds familiar to us by now: *Things are bad in the world. Yes, it's true! But the strongman will save you. The strongman will lock up the bad people or keep them out! The strongman will fix the economy and give you your jobs back, he will make you great again!*

The strongman will fix the church and return it to purity. The strongman will speak the truth with authority and bring the church back to God!

This approach has a long history with predictable results. Strongmen often deliver a few results... for a few people... for a little while. But almost always at a great cost.

¹ <http://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/the-dawn-of-the-strongman-era-is-here/>

Strongmen need scapegoats for why things are bad, and they almost always find them. Strongmen tend to become drunk with power quite quickly, as history demonstrates with depressing regularity.

And something happens to *us* as we embrace this approach. We become less sensitive to those that the strongman has to trample over to achieve results. We draw sharper lines between good and evil, black and white, us and them, right and wrong (and we become more creative in locating ourselves on the right side of these distinctions).

There is another approach, and this finally brings us to our text from Isaiah. This is the first of Isaiah's four "Servant Songs" that point to a coming Servant of Yahweh who will come to rescue an oppressed people.

The context into which these words were written were at least as bleak as ours, probably worse. Let's just briefly set the scene.

The people of Israel had been delivered from slavery and bondage in Egypt. God had delivered them through wilderness into the land of Canaan. They had become a nation and built a temple. For centuries they enjoyed some measure of success. But they began to wander after idols, they began to act unjustly. They strayed from God's covenant.

Then, in the sixth century BC, something unthinkable happened. The nation of Israel was defeated by Babylon. Israel's temple was destroyed and the people were marched off in chains.

The Babylonian victory over Israel was complete and thorough. As Amy Oden summarizes it,

This was utter, complete devastation of the political, social, economic and religious life God's people had known for centuries.²

And it produced an identity crisis. How could the God allow this to happen? Had God abandoned them? How would they become the great nation they once were again?

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1938

Into this context, God speaks a word about what he will do to fix the bad stuff.

He will send a servant. Not a strongman, but a servant.

This servant will be a source of delight. He will be animated by the Spirit of God and bring forth justice to the nations.

He will not cry out or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street. In sharp contrast to the strongmen who are forever shouting out their heroic slogans and empty promises, forever boosting their own egos and lining their own bank accounts.

He will not break a bruised reed or quench a dimly burning wick. He will not scapegoat the powerless or trample over the poor. He will, to borrow one commentator's words, "protect what is weak until it is strong enough to stand and keep gentle hands cupped around a weak flame until it can burn on its own."³

He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice on the earth.

He will bring release to captives open the eyes of the blind.

He will renew the call to righteousness, take his people by the hand, and give them once again as a light to the nations.

The servant of the Lord will do all of these things as a reflection of the very character and purposes of the God who created the heavens and the earth and who gave breath to human beings.

Isaiah speaks about this servant six hundred years or so before the first Advent of Christ.

About six hundred years before Jesus would enact these very words.

About six hundred years before the world would see what it looks like when their deliverer comes not as a strongman but a servant.

We know what happened, don't we? We know that the world didn't particularly care for the Servant. They wanted a strongman.

³ Stephanie A. Paulsell, "Pastoral Perspective on Isaiah 42:1-9" in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Vol. 1* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 218.

So much as they appreciated the Servant's miracles, inspiring as they found some of his teaching, as attractive as the Servant was, they ended up nailing him to a cross, pouring upon him all of their lust for revenge and violence, all of their fear and misguided religiosity, all of their anger and guilt.

And the Servant bore the sin of the world in his body and said, "Forgive them, they don't know what they are doing."

But this was not the end of the story, as we know. Three days later, the Servant would burst forth from the grave, he would show himself to his friends, he would ascend to the right hand of the father where he is exalted as Lord of all.

The Servant would enliven and comfort and embolden his followers with the promised Holy Spirit. And he would promise to return, as healer and judge of the living and the dead.

The Servant would demonstrate that no matter what we *think* we want, the last thing the world needs is need another strongman.

I read these words in a commentary this week:

The preacher's task during the season of Epiphany is to create a fresh portrayal of the one the church knows as its Christ. Epiphany is traditionally the season of gift giving that follows the arrival of the Christ child at Christmas. Think of this first Servant Song as Isaiah's gift to the church.⁴

I am convinced that the Servant Song *is* a gift to the church. But it is a gift that we need to keep re-opening, over and over again.

The outset of a New Year is a good time to be reminded that we, as a church, are people who belong to and model ourselves not after a strongman but a Servant.

⁴ Richard F. Ward, "Homiletical Perspective on Isaiah 42:1-9" in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Vol. 1* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 221.

The world, now perhaps more than ever, needs a community gathered around and defined by this Servant's teaching, his example, his self-giving sacrifice, and his promise of a new creation.

It needs a church that is committed to doing more than paying lip service to the Servant and what he has accomplished. It needs a church that believes, at the core of its being, that all that is bad in the world is not defeated by ever-more-resourceful displays of power, but by entering into the darkness with a determination to be light and love.

Which is perhaps another way of saying, "Our present moment—like so many moments throughout our lives—presents us with the very old choice between living lives of fear or living lives of love."

We are followers of a servant, not a strongman.

This is no advocacy of weakness. This is a redefinition of what strength looks like, and a call to reorient our own conceptions of what we admire and what we emulate and why.

It is a call for an end to the endless cycles of retributive violence and power games and manipulation and deceit that the strongmen of history have delivered us.

It is the way that God has chosen to deal with the bad stuff. And it is the path that he has called his church to join him on.

So, as we continue to take our first steps into 2017, I want to encourage you to walk with your eyes fixed on the One who has called you, the One who has lived and died and rose from the dead for you, the One who has walked the road before you.

2017 might not be as bad as 2016. Or it might be worse. None of us knows what the future holds.

But what we are convinced of, as followers of the Servant King, is that whatever the future holds, our task is to be about our Saviour's business.

Pursuing justice.

Acting and speaking with humility. This has always been desperately necessary in our world, but the need seems particularly acute now.

Being and *bringing* good news to the poor, the blind, those who are imprisoned (literally or metaphorically).

Helping those who are reeling to stand, guarding the light of those whose flame is barely flickering.

Committing ourselves to righteousness—living lives of purity and integrity and right relationship with God and neighbour.

Being salt and light in a world of darkness and decay.

Being servants of the Servant in a world that will always be drawn to the strongman.

This is our joyful task for the year ahead. For *every* year.

Because this is our God.

Amen.

