

Sermon Draft

Text: Isaiah 50:4–10

Sermon: Our Helper is Near

As the Church Year continues in the season after Pentecost, Christians use this time to celebrate the new life we have in Christ through his Holy Spirit. All the lessons for today describe how words have power. In the Old Testament Reading, the Servant is given a tongue that may sustain the weary (Isaiah 50:4). The Epistle from James uses the analogy of the bit in a horse's mouth or a rudder steering a ship to describe the power that words have in steering one through life (James 3:3–5). The tongue should be used to bless and not curse (3:9–10). The Gospel provides the account of Jesus healing a young boy possessed by a spirit. This time, Jesus' tongue is not used to sustain the weary, bless, or curse, but rather to deliver, to set free (Mark 9:25). Words have power, and it is the vivid demonstration of the Word of God that brings power over demons.

The winter of 1925 was terrifying for the residents of Nome, Alaska. After treating four cases of what appeared to be tonsillitis, the only doctor in town, Dr. Curtis Welch, came to a horrifying conclusion. The extremely contagious diphtheria had been confirmed. Without an antitoxin, the whole town of two thousand people and their surrounding native neighbors likely would be lost.

The problem was magnified in that the shipping ports had long been closed for the season, aircraft travel was impossible, and worse, the diphtheria antitoxin could only last six days in the freezing temperatures of the arctic. The closest source of the drug was Anchorage, Alaska, one thousand miles away. The Alaskan railroad could bring the drug to Nenana, but Nome was still some 675 miles distant.

The decision was made. The only way to save the isolated residents was to deliver the serum by dogsled. A relay of twenty teams each traveling approximately thirty miles was coordinated.

It was forty degrees below zero when the first dogsledder, Wild Bill Shannon, left Nenana with his life-bringing thirty-pound package of serum.

For even the most experienced dogsledder, forty degrees below zero is brutal and risky. But with so many lives on the line, Wild Bill had no choice. He set his face to the wind and peered into the bleak darkness ahead. Breaking the silence of the cold, crisp night, the cracking of his whip sounded as a lightning strike. As Bill cried, “Mush!” the clock was running.

For all of us, there are times in life when the path ahead looks dark and difficult. There are times when we are unsure which direction we should take or whether we should take any direction at all. These are times we may not be called to bring life-saving antitoxins to a remote village in Alaska, but we are called into the darkness, and the darkness is frightening. When these moments occur, where do we find the strength to move forward? Our reading for today will shed light on this.

Our text for today is from Isaiah chapter 50. This is the third of what are widely known as the “Servant Songs” in Isaiah. In the Jewish world, there’s debate as to whether the Servant is Israel, Isaiah, or the promised future Messiah. But as Christians, we hear the witness of the texts themselves. Each of the songs paints a picture of the Servant. And with each successive song, one becomes more and more convinced that the Servant is Jesus, the Promised Messiah, who came into the world to redeem the world.

Listen to the depiction of the Servant in this song. In vs 4–5, the Servant is depicted as one who sustains the weary and listens. In v 5, he has not been rebellious and does not turn away. V 6 offers a stark description of the Messiah. He offers his back and cheeks to blows and doesn’t hide his face from the mocking and spitting. Undoubtedly, this is a picture of Jesus, who was beaten, mocked, and spit upon and who, through it all, did not hide his face or turn away.

And what does this Servant do amidst such obstacles? V 7 provides the answer. He sets his face like a flint and is not put to shame. This is a picture of Jesus encountering Satan during the temptation in the wilderness. It's Jesus in the days leading up to Holy Week as he sets his face toward Jerusalem. It's Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane praying that this cup would pass. But after the night of praying and sweating blood, Jesus arises. He looks into the darkness and cries, "***Not my will, but yours, be done***" (Luke 22:42).

There are times in life when our paths ahead may be dark. You're familiar with these times. Perhaps it's when a series of tests has taken place and the diagnosis is not good. Or perhaps it's the pink slip at the end of the work day. Or perhaps it's more common and mundane. There's so much to do, and we aren't sure where to start. In each case, we are similar to the Servant. The world is beating us on the back and pulling our cheeks, mocking and spitting on us. All this reflects the human heart after the fall.

In response, our own sinful condition will, at times, bring doubt and fears into our lives, and we question whether God really cares.

The Stoics would have an answer. They would tell us to endure. One of the most famous Stoics, Marcus Aurelius, once said, “Everything that happens is either endurable or not. If it’s endurable, then endure it. Stop complaining. If it’s unendurable, then stop complaining. Your destruction will mean its end as well.” We are told to “Just buck up!”

Or perhaps the Epicureans could shed some light. They would encourage us not to get too attached to anything in this world because someday it will all be gone. Just live for today. But that offers no hope, because a life without attachments brings no joy.

Sadly, many Christians will also tell us that the answer is simply to pray harder or trust harder. They’ll say that if we just find more strength internally, we can get through whatever struggles we face.

The Servant, however, provides an alternative way. The key is found in v 8. It’s here that the Servant says, “*He who vindicates me is near.*”

We've already established that the Servant is Jesus. Why does he need vindication? Why is it important that the one who vindicates is near? Well, for his own sake, Jesus didn't need vindication. His standing before the heavenly Father was always secure. But for our sakes, when bleak times are ahead, it's important for us to find two things in God's vindication of Jesus.

We need to understand that the root cause of all doubt is our separation from God after the fall. There was a time when we walked with God in the *"cool of the day."* We had no worries or concerns because God was walking beside us every step of the way. We knew that we were his beloved. But when sin entered the world, we broke that relationship with God, and now we doubt whether God really does walk with us. That separation from God is precisely what Jesus took upon himself on the cross: *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (Matthew 27:46).

We should remember that God sent the Servant into the world to provide vindication for his beloved. Jesus was fully human and fully divine, but he allowed himself to rely only on the promises of God's Word. While confronting Satan in the wilderness, there was temptation. Before heading to Jerusalem, he must have paused. In the night in the garden, he cried out to God to take the cup away. But God, who vindicates, was near. And Jesus set his face like a flint and headed to Calvary. There, by his atoning death, he reconciled us to God, restored that relationship we broke. So now God is with us, walking with us, again.

The cure for dark times is to remember that this same Jesus, the Servant, has walked before us. He who needed no vindication nevertheless trusted his Father to do just that, to declare him the very Son of God by raising him from the dead. Christ—obeying his Father perfectly, dying in our place, rising from the grave—has done everything; we need to do nothing.

And now we can trust the same promises of God that Jesus trusted—that in his time, God will vindicate us, declare for all to hear that we are his beloved children.

When the guilt of sin is overwhelming, remember that he who vindicates is near. When the diagnosis is not what we've hoped for, remember that he who vindicates is near. When the pink slip arrives or the work ahead seems daunting, remember he who vindicates is near. God, our Helper who vindicates us, is always near.

It was two o'clock in the morning when Gunnar Kaasen and his team arrived in Nome. After the work of twenty dogsled teams, five grueling days, and 675 miles, the antitoxins arrived into the hands of the doctor. The town would be saved. But it wasn't without a cost. A few of the dogs died, and a few of the dogsledders had severe frostbite. Today, the annual Iditarod race is performed to commemorate the accomplishment of this feat in 1925.

But for Christians, our victory happened when the Servant broke through death and won eternal victory. Even in our sins, even in our doubts and the very real troubles with which a sinful world assaults us, he has vindicated us, and he is near. In his name.

Amen