

Series: Transition

August 20, 2017

Title: Light of the World

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Text: Isaiah 42:1-7

Statues, anyone?

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The time had come to take a stand.

The word on the street was that the hated King Herod was dying. A crowd of young men gathered in front of the Temple that Herod had built. Above its great gate hung a carved golden eagle: the symbol of Rome. Herod had commanded that it be put there, as a statement of Rome's ultimate power. But now the king might already have died in his palace in Jericho. It was time to cleanse the Temple of this desecration.

At high noon young men appeared on the top of the gate. They lowered themselves down with ropes and attacked the hated eagle with axes, to the roars of the crowd below.

But the king was still alive. His soldiers arrested the demonstrators and carted them off to Jericho where they were executed on the king's orders.

A little toddler named Jesus of Nazareth would have been too young to remember that day. But the memory of Herod's eagle and the lives sacrificed to remove it shaped His world and smoldered like a fire underground, waiting to erupt at a moment's notice.

Sound familiar?

Sound familiar? Somebody puts up a statue; somebody tears it down.

Just last week we saw the city of Charlottesville, VA wracked by protests over the removal of a statue. In the end, one protester was killed and many others injured. The entire nation became caught up in the uproar, from the White House on down.

And now statues are coming down or going into mothballs all over the country. For many, the time has come to take a stand and usher in a whole new era. Their very presence seems to give credence to the hateful rhetoric and actions of white supremacists. Time to cut the golden eagle down from the Temple gate!

A world coming apart?

For many of us it's not that simple. We want nothing to do with the KKK or other white supremacists groups. But neither do we want to see vigilante groups roaming the countryside, intent on imposing their own Cultural Revolution on America.

At times it can seem like the land we thought we knew is coming apart! How are we as followers of Jesus to respond in times of such turmoil, confusion, anger and violence? What do you do when your world is coming apart?

As a young man, Jesus faced the same question. Would he simply perpetuate the status quo? Would he become radicalized and join a resistance movement? Would he sacrifice his life tearing down the next golden eagle from the walls of the Temple?

Or would he find a different path and a different place to take a stand?

The Servant

Chosen for a special time:

A clue to the different path that Jesus took is found in the OT Book of Isaiah:

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Isaiah 42:1 NIV

"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."

God is announcing an entirely new way of making a difference in a world that seems to be coming apart. He will now work through His *servant* to heal His world. He will put His Holy Spirit upon this servant, and through the work of the servant He will bring justice to an unjust world.

A new kind of serving:

How will this servant do his work? God explains:

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Isaiah 42:2-3 NIV

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

"A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;"

No screaming protesters here. No mobs pulling down statues or waving hateful banners. No activists scaling the Temple walls to tear down the golden eagle. This servant does his work quietly.

Instead of relying on anger and violence, God's servant works to heal and restore. What good is a bruised reed, we might ask? Its stem is crushed; it's good for nothing but to be thrown away! But God's servant refuses to continue the breaking and crushing process. He binds crushed and broken limbs.

And what good is a smoldering wick? All smoke; no light. Why not snuff it out? But God's servant refuses to extinguish the flickering wick. Instead, he patiently and tenderly nurses the flame back to life.

This is how God brings true justice to His world.

New hope:

It is right there at "the bottom of the U" where things seem hopeless and out of control that God's servant does his work. God enters that broken place through His servant. And the servant, if he is doing God's work, does not become a smoldering wick or a bruised reed. The servant does not become embroiled in the chaos of the moment. Instead, the servant leads the way up from the "bottom of the U" into God's place of healing and New Creation:

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Isaiah 42:4 NIV [amended translation]

"he will not burn dimly or be bruised till he establishes justice on earth. In his teaching the islands will put their hope"

Light of the World**Light for a darkened world:**

And now the great Creator and Covenant God speaks to His servant:

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Isaiah 42:5-7 NIV

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:

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"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, to open the eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness."

The Life-giving Creator God calls His servant to do the same. The servant is to refuse to be a smoldering wick. Instead, the servant is God's Light of the world. Just as God began His work of making the world by creating light, the servant is a light giver:

- A light to the Gentiles
- A light to the blind
- A light to the prisoners of darkness

Instead of just being one more angry voice on one side of the street, God's servant lights the way out of the chaos, the anger, the injustice of our broken world.

Jesus, the Servant:

This is the choice that a young man from Nazareth made in the middle of the tumult of His world. He answered God's call to become God's Servant, filled with God's Spirit. He put His energy into healing instead of tearing down.

Matthew writes:

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Matthew 12:15b-21 NIV

A large crowd followed him, and he healed all who were ill. He warned them not to tell others about him. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

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"Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets.

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"A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he has brought justice through to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope."

The path Jesus chose was not easy. The problems in His world didn't melt away at His approach! Jesus became the target of hatred and violence from those who sought Israel's liberation from Rome *and* from Rome's defenders. Both stood at the foot of His cross, jeering Him as a failure.

They are long gone, but Jesus continues to shine His light and bring His justice. "In his name the nations will put their hope."

Light of the World:

So what could that look like in our broken and chaotic world? What is the alternative to tearing down statues or waving hateful banners? What is the alternative to insulting and demeaning others?

David Shiflett, writing in the Wall Street Journal (August 18, 2017) has a daring suggestion. He recommends not taking down statues from the past,

but putting up even more statues – monuments that point the way out of the darkness and into the light of God’s justice:

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Martin Luther King Jr. might make a nice neighbor for Jeb Stuart, while Mr. Obama, who carried Virginia twice, could keep Stonewall Jackson in good company.

And how to answer Jefferson Davis, a vibrant bigot with a theological bent? He once said of blacks: "We recognize the fact of the inferiority stamped upon that race of men by the Creator, and from the cradle to the grave, our Government as a civil institution, marks that inferiority."

Since we’re looking for truth, we couldn’t do better than a monument to abolitionist Sojourner Truth. To my mind her "Ain’t I a Woman" speech is more powerful than the Gettysburg Address: "Look at me! Look at my arm! I have plowed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me -- and ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man, when I could get it, and bear the lash as well – and ain’t I a woman? And I have borne 13 children – 13 children! – and seen most all of 'em sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman?"

The best way to dispel the darkness is to be a light. You can’t drive out darkness with more darkness. You can’t defeat hate with hate. You can’t bring peace with shouting.

We are God’s statues – carved in His image and likeness. We are God’s lanterns. When we shine, He shines through us. We are the Light of the World.