

Sermon: A Bruised Reed He Will Not Break

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Jan. 11, 2026)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A conversation I had with a particular teaching assistant of a New Testament class I took back in my seminary days at Knox College, still to this day haunts me.

The TA, a Black woman originally from Jamaica, doing her PhD on the post-colonial reading of the Scripture, was really getting to me. Everything thing she said, every issue she dissected, every critique she offered had something to do with post-colonial discourse, which is the theory that challenges the dominant Western imperial narratives by reclaiming marginalized histories and voices from formerly colonized peoples.

Post-colonial discourse was all the rage on university campuses back then (and probably still). To be clear, it is a theory that I do not necessarily have problem with, and do see the need to widen, broaden perspectives, to include voices from multiple sources, particularly those of marginalized communities.

But for whatever reason, which I was never too clear, I had just about enough of colonial discourse for that day. So I decided to challenge the TA's tendency to read the Holy Scripture only from one particular perspective. We went back and forth in class, in full view of my other classmates, until I thought I had bested her in one particular argument, which to this day I do not fully recall.

What I do recall is her retort, in exasperation, "Paul, I am really surprised why you have so much problem with post-colonial theory!", she said, "You are, after all, from Taiwan, an island that in its history, was repeatedly colonized by other countries!" "Of all people, you should understand what it was like to be marginalized!"

I was stunned! No one had ever referred to my background in an academic argument before. I didn't know what to say. The class finished soon after, and I never got a chance to have further conversation with her afterwards. But the point she made gnawed at me still. Yes I was born in Taiwan. Yes the history of Taiwan was littered with colonial occupiers, from

the Dutch, the Portuguese, the Hans, the Japanese, and even Nationalists from mainland China post Second World War. For a tiny little island of no more than 1/50 of the size of the Great Lakes, everybody seems to want a piece of that territory. Even now, the Communist China has hundreds of missiles aimed at Taiwan, and regularly conducts practices of naval blockade.

Through it all, the resilient people of Taiwan have built an impressive economy with autonomous, self-governing democracy. I joke that Taiwan is not all about bubble teas and microchips, its GDP per capita is now on par with Canada—quite an impressive achievement that even an ex-pat like myself could be proud of.

Nevertheless, what my TA said was right. We all read the Scripture from lenses that are greatly influenced by one's social location. What she got wrong was my particular social location. Though I was born a Taiwanese and immigrated to Canada at the tender age of 15, my background has never been that of being marginalized or colonized. My social location is probably closer to Protestant Christian upwardly mobile middle class. So by that logic, I read the Scripture through that lens, and would have no way of truly understand how it felt to be oppressed, or marginalized, or colonized.

There is no ambiguity to the social location of Isaiah of the exile, the author of chapter 40 to 55 of the Book of Isaiah. Here was a prophet of the Lord who had, in the 6th century BCE, experienced what it was like to be a defeated people; what it was like to be attacked, slaughtered, imprisoned, tortured, subjugated and exiled. The horror of imperialism and colonialism was not something for him to discuss in an academic setting, on the hindsight, as an afterthought. That horror was a felt reality in a world ruled by 'might makes right', a cruel and unforgiving world of the Babylonian Empire.

What is truly special about this prophet, whose social location was that amongst the remnants of Israel, whose pitiful existence could've been snuffed out in a blink of an eye. What is truly special about this prophet of the Lord is the four Servant Songs he composed, in Isaiah 42:1-9, 49:1-13, 50:4-11 and 52:13-53:12.

In our Lectionary reading today, we encounter the first of the four. Isaiah of the exile offers a portrait of a mysterious servant of God, exhibiting a kind of leadership that is patient, nonviolent and merciful. This chosen one of the Lord does not execute justice by force, instead he exhibits a kind of

tender care for those who are displaced and vulnerable. “*A bruised reed he will not break*, “Isaiah says, “*and a dimly burning wick he will not quench*” (v.3)

A true leader protects those who are weak until they are strong enough to stand on their own. A true leader keeps gentle hands cupped around a wicker until it is strong enough to be fanned into flame. A true leader brings forth justice, not vengeance, but justice in an honourable and faithful way.

What a startling contrast it was to the prophet’s contemporary rulership as exhibited by an Assyrian king who bragged about “all those not subservient to him, he snapped like a marsh-reed, he subdued them under his feet”. What a startling contrast it is to our contemporary model of leadership that berates women, that outlaws LGBTQ+ communities, that sends masked gunmen to terrorize their own citizens, that attacks other countries with little or no pretext, that wages wars—economic or otherwise.

Can you imagine a candidate for public office running on a platform of not breaking a bruised reed and not quenching a dimly burning wick? Some would call that model of leadership weak, unrealistic and self-defeating from the start. Isaiah of the exile insists that this form of leadership is possible, even desirable. The Servant of God is called to bring justice, says the prophet, and “*will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth.*” (v.4) In contrast to the ‘shock and awe’ model of leadership, the Servant of God chooses patient and never-ceasing work—work that steadily fans justice into an unstoppable flame.

A great deal of scholarly work and debates hover around the identity of this Servant of the Lord. Was the Servant an individual, like Cyrus the Persian King, who was clearly identified in Isaiah 45, as God’s anointed, who was to bring deliverance to God’s people? Or was the Servant pointing to a group, perhaps Israel who was clearly identified in Isaiah 49, or more likely the remnant of Israel, or some version of an ideal Israel. Or is the Servant really a prophecy about the life and ministry of Jesus, as identified in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 12?

I find myself more in agreement with the Biblical scholar Paul Hanson, who sees the Servant more as “a catalyst for reflection on the nature of the response demanded of those who have received a call from God.” In essence, anyone who has received such a call would be the Servant, whose pastoral work is to foster justice and reconciliation.

What God asks of them, and of us, is clear—to be “*light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.*” (Isaiah 42:6-7) As God proclaims through Isaiah in the opening verse, “Here is my servant, whom I uphold;”, God proclaims in our hearing now, “Here are you, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.”

On this Sunday, we remember the baptism of Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, let us hear the words of Isaiah 42, the first of four Servant Songs, as Jesus heard them. Let us hear the words, images, symbols, hopes and visions that Jesus heard and felt moved to act. After all, at the start of his ministry in the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus chooses to articulate the vision of Isaiah as his own calling:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”* (Luke 4:18-19)

These words of Isaiah have guided and shaped the ministry of Jesus in a profound way. He did care for those of bruised reed; he cupped his hands around the dimmest wicks and fanned them into flames. The vision of Isaiah that captured the imagination of our Lord ought to capture ours as well.

When Jesus rises up from the water of Jordan, newly baptized and anointed by God’s loving words, the vision of Isaiah laid the foundation of his path, his earthly ministry of a new way of living, a new model of leadership guided by a hunger for justice and mercy.

As Isaiah of the exiles concludes with these words, I shall conclude my reflection the same as well:

*“See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth, I tell you of them.”* (Isaiah 42:9)

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