

Sermon: Chosen to Serve

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Jan. 18, 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.

Manifest Destiny as a concept has been in the public discourse lately. It is the expansionist belief in the 19th century United States, that American settlers were destined to expand westward across North America, bringing with them the American values and the American ways.

It is rooted in the belief of American exceptionalism, that the United States is distinct, unique and exemplary compared to other nations, and such belief is both obvious (therefore “manifest”), and certain (therefore “destiny”).

Originally coined by journalist John O’Sullivan in 1845, Manifest Destiny has been used by various U.S. politicians across all stripes to justify policies of aggressive territorial acquisition, displacement of Native American population, even the Mexican-American War of 1846.

According to historian William Earl Weeks, there are three basic tenants behind this controversial concept: 1) the assumption of the unique moral virtue of the United States; 2) the assertion of its mission to redeem the world by spreading its form of government and its way of life; 3) (here is the kicker) the faith in the nation’s divinely ordained destiny to succeed in this mission.

As an ideology, Manifest Destiny in the 21st century is both divisive and dangerous. Divisive as in dividing people from both within the United States and from without. Dangerous as in destabilizing existing international norm and relationship—just look at countries that are getting the short-end of that mighty stick, as in Venezuela, Cuba, Mexico, Colombia, Denmark, European Union and perhaps even Canada.

The political side of this ideology aside, what really bothers me is the misuse of the notion of divinely ordained destiny. For whenever the Scriptures speak of divine ordination, it is always with the mind of being ordained as servant. Chosen yes, but chosen to serve, to be a blessing to many.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are continuing this week, in Isaiah 49, of the second of the four Servant Songs of Isaiah. As you may recall

last week, in Isaiah 42, we hear the voice of God introducing the servant, *“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights”* (Isaiah 42:1).

The first Servant Song celebrates the patient, nonviolent, and merciful ministry of the one who faithfully brings forth justice, who does not cry nor lift up his voice, who breaks no bruised reed, nor quench a dimly burning wick. The coastlands, sings the prophet, wait for this Servant’s teaching.

In the second Servant Song, we hear the voice of the chosen Servant, speaking to the same coastlands, calling to peoples from far away. To these strangers from far away, the Servant sings a song revealing a remarkable vocation.

Who is this Servant, you may ask? As I explained last week, there has been considerable scholarly debate about the identity of this Servant in these songs. One would think the debate as settled, based on Isaiah 49. For in verse 3, the Servant quotes God as affirming that, *“You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.”*

However, there seems to be textual variations suggesting that the designation of Israel was a later addition to the original text. Furthermore, the ministry of this Servant, as in verse 5-7, indicates it is to reconcile Israel to God. This has led some scholars to identify the servant in individual historical figures rather than the community of the people of God.

I take the position that it could be both, as biblical scholar Paul Hanson puts it, “the Servant is both faithful individual and obedient community.”

The call from God this Servant describes is radical but not unique, as in verse 1, *“The Lord called me before I was born; while I was in my mother’s womb he named me.”* It is radical to imagine someone as destined, or perhaps pre-destined, to be called by God, even before he or she is born. It speaks of a special, almost intimate bond between the Creator and the created. Yet, it is not unique, for psalmist also sings of his inward parts being formed and knit together by God, in his mother’s womb (Psalm 139:13), and the prophet Jeremiah speaks of being formed, knew, consecrated and appointed by God, “in the womb” (Jeremiah 1:5).

The Lord God we worship is a God who does not cease calling, as the psalmist attests in Psalm 50:1, *“The mighty one, God the Lord, speaks and summons the earth, from the rising of the sun to its setting.”* The earth,

the sun, the people of Israel, individuals have all received God's call, and likewise, you and I, in our own context.

The call of God, as sung in the second Servant Song, comes in four parts. It begins with the call, in the mother's womb. This Servant would be hidden, like a sharp sword or a polished arrow, in the shadow of God's hand, the servant is hidden away. How or why it is unclear. What is clear is that in due course, God will reveal this Servant, "*You are my servant, in whom I will be glorified.*" (Isaiah 49:3) Note it is God, not the servant, to be glorified. When we read this text during the season of Epiphany, we are reminded of the glory of the Lord shining all around us.

In the next movement of this song, the Servant laments of the failure to live up to this calling. "*But I said, 'I have laboured in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.'*" (v.4) It is a sentiment as old as the Servant, for anyone who has served the Lord could attest—sometimes, perhaps even most times, it feels like we are wasting our time, spinning in our wheels. Does anything we do serves its intended purpose? Has the will of God really being accomplished?

In spite of this failure, perceived or otherwise, hope lives on still in the heart of this Servant. "*Yet surely my cause is with the Lord and my reward with my God.*" Gripes, as I often say, goes up, never down. Take your grievances to the Lord, and God will surely mediate, for the Lord God is still the ground of our beings and the foundation of all that is good.

In affirming the goodness of God, the Servant remembers also why he is called, that is "*to bring Jacob back to God, and that Israel might be gathered to the Lord.*" (v.5). In remembering this original call, the Servant opens a space, a possibility of an additional call, as God says, in verse 6, "*It is too light a thing that you should be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.*"

Rather than looking down on the Servant's failures and adjusting the call downwards to meet diminished expectations, God elevates the call and enlarges the scope. The vocation to which I first called you, God says, is not all I want from you. As the Servant turns back to God, God turns back to the chosen one, by giving a larger vocation: That is shine! Shine as light to all the nations! Shine as light to all the peoples. So the salvation of God shall reach to all corners of the world. All life is sacred. All life is your concern, sings God to the Servant—everyone nation, everyone person, every life.

As Stephanie A. Paulsell surmises, contributing to the pastoral perspective on Isaiah 49:1-7 in *Feasting on the Word*, “Surely this is the song God sings to each of us: that all of our work, no matter how local, must have the good of the whole world as its aim. In our globalized world, in which a seemingly innocuous action—a purchase, say—in one place can contribute to suffering in another, this is no easy vocation. Embedded in this call to be a light to the nations is a call to know the world in which we hope to shine. Through study and encounter, through travel and prayer, through seeking to understand the results of our choices of what to buy, what to wear, what to eat, we return, like the Servant, to God and receive a deeper vocation, one that encompasses strangers far off, as well as dear ones close at hand.”

Allow me to close my meditation with the final movement of this second of four Servant Songs, as in Isaiah 49:7,

*"Thus says the Lord,
the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One,
to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations,
the slave of rulers,
“Kings shall see and stand up;
princes, and they shall prostrate themselves,
because of the Lord, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”*

The Lord has indeed chosen you and I, and all of us. I like to invite you to turn to one another, and say to your neighbours, the ones sitting nearby: “The Lord has chosen you!”

We are the chosen people, as were Abraham, Joseph, Samuel, Ruth, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Mary, Elizebeth, John, Peter, Andrew, Paul, and even our Lord Jesus. Chosen not to be served, but to serve. Chosen to be blessings to all. And it is glorious!

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