

## **Sermon: Not as I will, but as You will.**

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, March 29, 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.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, as we enter into the Holy Week, journeying along with Jesus towards the cross, we come to this passage in Isaiah 50:4-9, the third of four Servant Songs.

Anonymity seems to characterize this passage, written by an unnamed prophet of the 6th century BC—as most biblical scholars simply call him the Second Isaiah, or as I like to say, ‘the Isaiah of exile’. This unnamed prophet, in turn, gives shape to an equally unnamed figure, known simply as ‘God’s servant’.

Scholars have debated over the identities of this servant: Is he Israel, in the collective and national sense, or an ideal Israel which never truly existed in the bible nor now? Or perhaps this servant points to an individual, a messianic figure, which to us as Christians understand him to be Christ Jesus?

What we do know, according to the First Servant Song of Isaiah 42, this servant is the chosen one of the Lord, empowered by God’s Spirit, bringing justice and righteousness to the nations, not with power but with gentleness. We know also, according to the Second Servant Song of Isaiah 49, despite initial feelings of futility, the servant’s mission is to restore not only Israel, but to bring light to the Gentiles, thus incorporating them into God’s covenantal design.

So in our readings today, the third Servant Song, we encounter a servant who, according to James A. Wallace, writing for the Feasting on the Word series, “sings of suffering and solace while confessing courage and confidence in the Lord”.

The Song begins in a peaceful setting. The Servant is aware of being given by the Lord “*the tongue of a teacher*”, in order “*to sustain the weary with a word*” (v.4) The Servant speaks of how the Lord rouses the Servant “*morning by morning*”, in gentle awakening, as the Servant begins each day as a learner, with God giving instructions.

It all sounds way too congenial, like a seminary student residing in a relaxing campus, with an over-eager and perhaps over-protective

instructor, and a disciple who is open, receptive and obedient. Martin Luther described this passage as “a most harmonious relationship between the learned tongue, the ready ear, and the heart prepared for learning.”

However, such serenity does not last, as it is followed by a sharp change of mood in verse 6: “*I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face, from insult and spitting.*” What just happened there? Who were the anonymous “those”? Where did they come from? We do not know.

Nevertheless, the Lord God is there with the Servant, and by such presence, the Servant has the courage to bear what is happening, without being disgraced, as he declares in verse 7: “*The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame, [for] he who vindicates me is near.*”

The best way for us as readers to ponder the nature of this vindicator, is to picture a court room scene, where the accused is opening challenging the accusers to show themselves, to stand. “*Who will contend with me? Let us stand in court together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me.*” (v.8)

This verb ‘to vindicate’ in Hebrew is the same verb as “to make righteous”. The vindicator proves to the wider public that the Servant is in the right. The Servant is confident knowing this vindicator is not only present, is in fact the judge. Before such an ultimate, righteous and faithful judge, the Servant trusts.

We can easily see why the Church sees Jesus as the Servant, particularly by placing the this text of Isaiah 50 in the start of the Holy Week. Jesus is the teacher who listens first and foremost to the voice and will of the Father, as the voice from heaven says to disciples after the transfiguration experience, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” Jesus is the teacher who proclaims the coming kingdom, as good news, while curing every disease and every sick among the people (Matthew 4:23). He is the teacher who invites those who are weary and haven laden, “*Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*” (Matthew 11:29-30)

In fact, the Gospel of Matthew seems ever eager to portray Jesus as a teacher: he climbs a mountain to teach the masses in the ‘sermon on the mount’ of Matthew 5-7; he teaches the disciples as he sends them out on

mission, two-by-two (chapter 10); he teaches often in parables and explains why he teaches in parables (chapter 13). Jesus teaches in towns, cities, along the shore of Galilee, the waterhole of Samaria, even in the temple of Jerusalem, with words, stories, parables and deeds.

Even as the passion narrative unfolds in the Gospel of Matthew, we hear the voice of the teacher instructing the disciples during the Last Supper on the upcoming suffering that will shake the foundation of their faith (Matt 26:31). We see as Jesus face the violence of his enemies, he forbids the disciples not to yield to violence, "*for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.*" (v.52). We are astonished by his statement when being tried by the high priest and explaining the consequences of their foolish course of action, that "*From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.*" (v.64) We are equally amazed when confronted by the Roman governor, Jesus wrestles from Pilate's own mouth, an accidental and unlikely admission that the one being tried is, in fact, the "*King of the Jews*" (Matthew 27:11)

Most importantly of all, we are remind of the importance of praying, of staying vigilant in prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. It is in that prayer by which Jesus pleaded with God to take away the cup of suffering, referring to his upcoming trial and crucifixion, that we come the realize the full extent of his agony, and the full extent of his obedience to his Father in Heaven, as he prays, "*Not as I will, but as You will*" (v.39) Not as I will, but as God wills.

In our Scripture passages today, we see before us, God's Servant and Son, Jesus Christ. Yet this Servant is not alone. Of all the scholarly views on this third of four Servant Songs of Isaiah, I much prefer John Calvin's take: he prefers to zoom out and see them as a template for the experience of all faithful servants of God, for all those who believe they are called to be ministers of the word. And in that familiar refrain of 'priesthood of all believers' in the Reformed doctrine of the reforming faith, we are all called to share in the ministry of Jesus: to speak a word to sustain the weary and the brokenhearted, to protect the safety and dignity of the refugees and the homeless, to care for the outcast and the ignored.

The world is in desperate need of servants, who are able to set their faces like flint, in carrying out God's mission of justice, peace and reconciliation, without flinching or flickering, all the while trusting in God, the

one who vindicates, who will bring about the total transformation of heaven and earth through the coming kingdom of God. That in deed is good news.

Allow me to conclude this message with what I think the servanthood all believers could be.

In 1972, NASA launched the exploratory space probe Pioneer 10. According to the *Time* magazine, the satellite's primary mission was to reach Jupiter, photograph the planet and its moons, and beam data back to earth—about Jupiter's magnetic field, radiation belts, atmosphere and so on. Scientists regarded this as a bold plan, for at that time no satellite from earth had ever gone beyond Mars, and they feared the asteroid belt might destroy it before reaching its intended destination.

But Pioneer 10 accomplished its mission and much, much more. Swinging past the giant planet in November 1973, Jupiter's immense gravity hurled Pioneer 10 at a higher rate of speed toward the edge of the solar system. At one billion miles from the sun, Pioneer 10 passed Saturn. At some two billion miles, it hurtled past Uranus; Neptune at nearly three billion miles; Pluto at almost four billion miles.

By 1997, twenty-five years after its launch, Pioneer 10 was more than six billion miles from the sun. And despite that immense distance, it continued to beam back radio signals back to earth. Perhaps the most remarkable fact was, those signals emanate from an 8-watt transmitter, which radiates about as much power as a bedroom night light, and takes more than nine hours to reach Earth.

The Little Satellite That Could, as some had dubbed it, was not qualified to do what it did. Engineers designed Pioneer 10 with a useful life of just three years. But like an energizer bunny, it kept going and going and going. By simple longevity, its tiny 8-watt transmitter radio accomplished more than anyone thought possible.

So it is when we offer ourselves to serve the Lord. God can work even through someone with 8-watt abilities, so long as we are willing.

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