

Identity and Intentionality

From the Lenten sermon series: The Servant of the Lord

Text: Isaiah 50:7; Luke 9:51

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan

February 28, 1988

Transcription of the spoken sermon

I have set my face like a flint... Isaiah 50:7

... he set his face to go to Jerusalem. Luke 9:51

Tomorrow I give my first lecture to The Introduction to Preaching class. At some time during the term, I will address the matter of telling sermons. I will not use today's title as an example of how to do it. If you come to worship on the basis of the title of the message, you would not likely have come this morning.

"Identity and Intentionality."

Doesn't sound very promising, does it? I grant you it is about as prosaic as one could get. My only justification for my title is that it points to precisely what I want to set before you: That as God's People we must be *clear about our identity and intentional in the execution of our ministry*.

Identity: Who we are.

Intentionality: The deliberateness with which we do what we are called to do.

Let me set this message in the context of Lent/Eastertide, 1988. The Lenten focus, Part I of this series of messages, is "The Servant of the Lord." We are examining the vocation of the Servant in Isaiah 40-55 and the fulfilling of that vocation in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus who adopted the Servant motif as the model for his ministry.

Jesus understood himself to be the Servant of the Lord.

Jesus calls us to be a Servant People. By understanding the Servant concept in Isaiah and how Jesus lived it out, we will be instructed and inspired to realize our

calling to be The Lord's Servant community and to do so with self-conscious awareness and intentional resolution. That is our purpose.

Should I be successful in that purpose, then the on-going development of the Christ Community story will follow as a matter of course, then our response will be, not to a charismatic leader, not to a finely-tuned campaign of manipulation, but to the Word of God.

Let us begin then with the portrait of the Servant as it comes to expression in the third of the four Servant Songs in Isaiah 40-55. The Old Testament text is Isaiah 50:4-9. The Servant describes his calling, the opposition he encounters, the confidence he has in God Who called him and then gives us this vivid image:

I have set my face like a flint

The servant of Isaiah had a clear sense of identity; he was convinced that he was called of God to speak to God's people in Babylon a word of forgiveness and imminent salvation from their experience of exile. Remember, this is the prophet whose opening words are.

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and tell her this, that she has fulfilled her term of bondage, that her penalty is paid.

This is the prophet to whom a voice said, "Cry!"

In the third Servant Song which is our present focus, the Servant says, "The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher." He goes on to tell how God has sharpened his hearing so that he might learn the word to speak to God's people. He encountered opposition; he suffered scorn and mocking. Yet he remained confident:

... The Lord God stands by to help me; therefore no insult can wound me. I have set my face like a flint.

The Servant was a messenger of God's salvation and with that clearly before him, he resolutely determined to carry out his task.

I have set my face like a flint.

That is a wonderful image. It speaks of one who has sense of identity and a certainty about what one is called to be and do and who looks neither to the right nor the left, but with single-minded determination pursues a course straight for the goal.

If you want to understand it in contemporary terms, contrast that image with the presidential hopefuls - Republican and Democratic alike, who in Iowa sang the

Iowa fight song, in New Hampshire sang a New England tune, and are articulating with studied ambiguity their Southern strategy in preparation for Super Tuesday. Hardly flint-like; closer to a waxed nose profile.

When Luke told the story of Jesus, he borrowed the image of Isaiah to describe the resolution of Jesus as he set out for the final confrontation in Jerusalem. In our New Testament text, we read,

As the time approached when he was to be taken up to heaven, he (Jesus) set his face resolutely towards Jerusalem. (9:51)

Luke sets his Gospel from 9:51 to 19:44 in the context of the journey to Jerusalem. We know that the Gospels are not biographies of Jesus, and the Gospel writers were not giving a chronological account of successive days and weeks in the life of Jesus. The Gospels are faith statements, theological documents, deliberately composed to portray who Jesus was and what he came to do. And so the journey to Jerusalem in Luke is not so much a geographical concern as it is Luke's way of telling the way of Jesus and inviting others to join in and follow that way.

But we know there was a time in Jesus' ministry when he deliberately set out for Jerusalem with the intention of bringing his message of the Kingdom to final confrontation with the Jewish established religious institution. What Luke conveys with this introductory word is the flint-like resolution with which Jesus pursued his course.

Like the Servant in Isaiah to whom Jesus looked as his own model, Jesus knew himself claimed and called by God to bring salvation to the world. Like the Servant he met opposition, but he did not waver. He had a strong sense of identity; with deliberate intentionality he moved toward the goal. All of this is wrapped up in that little phrase,

... he set his face resolutely towards Jerusalem.

Self-aware, intentional, he set out to fulfill the will of God for his life.

Luke sets the ministry of Jesus in the context of the way to Jerusalem and writes his Gospel as an invitation to all who read to follow Jesus on the way. It is an invitation to us who are once again on Lenten pilgrimage to Jerusalem, to Holy Week, to crucifixion and resurrection. As we contemplate our identity as the People of God, followers of Jesus Christ, we too must test the resoluteness of our intention. Nowhere does Jesus call people to discipleship under false pretense. In the immediate context of Jesus' own setting out, Luke gives us some clues as to the nature of that discipleship.

We learn at once that the mission to which we are called involves neither coercion nor angry reaction.

To go from Galilee to Jerusalem involved going through Samaria, and the relations between Jews and Samaritans were strained, to say the least. Most Jews would circumvent Samaria going by way of the Jordan East Bank. But Jesus sent his disciples ahead to make arrangements to go through Samaria. This was a sign of his care, a token of friendship, but the Samaritans wanted nothing to do with him since he was on his way to Jerusalem. They rejected his approach.

James and John were furious. They wanted to call down fire from heaven on the Samaritans like Elijah had done. But Jesus rebuked them and they went to another place.

It is interesting that John the Baptist, too, had wanted Jesus to be a second Elijah, but Jesus chose rather the Servant of Israel as his model. The Servant accepted his suffering voluntarily, trusting his cause to God Whom he believed would vindicate him.

As followers of Jesus there will be an honest approach, invitation, offer of the Gospel, but never coercion. The Gospel is offered, the invitation is given, but there must be no force-feeding.

And never is angry reaction in order. We call down no fire from heaven on those who reject the message, who spurn the offer of the Gospel. If there is, we have too much of ourselves, too much of our own ego invested.

As they proceed on the way, an enthusiastic candidate for the Kingdom comes and says, "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus says, "You will? Do you really know what you are saying? Foxes have holes and birds their nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." This is not an isolated instance. Jesus always cautioned, "Count the cost," for he never apologized for the self-sacrifice expected of the Christian.

Jesus met another person and invited him to follow. He said, "Yes, but let me bury my father first." Now, it's unlikely that his father had died; he was saying I have obligations to family first; then I will follow. Jesus' response was, "Leave the dead bury the dead; you must announce the Kingdom."

And then there was one who said he wanted to follow but first return home and say farewell to his family, to which Jesus responded, "No one who sets his hand to the plough and then keeps looking back is fit for the kingdom of God."

In the citing of these examples immediately after portraying Jesus with his face set resolutely towards Jerusalem, Luke is saying clearly that the call to follow Jesus involves a clear identity and a resolute intentionality.

Identity - The Servant of the Lord called by God to hear his word and speak his word - to proclaim the Kingdom, to announce God's great salvation.

Intentionality -To be resolute, having counted the cost, willing to sacrifice, willing to give God's program priority, willing to give it undivided attention.

Let's bring it right down to Christ Community and let's think first of all of the ministry we share together - We are People of God; we are followers of Jesus Christ. We have heard the good news, the Gospel of grace, and we have experienced that grace, receiving the word of forgiveness, knowing ourselves taken up into the love of God.

Seventeen years ago we renamed ourselves - we took the name Christ Community as a statement of the identity we would seek to realize, defining the kind of community we desired to become - a community of Christ's people graced and mediating the unconditional grace of God to all who sought healing and wholeness.

In many wonderful ways that identity has been realized. In self-conscious awareness we have opened our arms to all without question or condition. We have been and we increasingly are a place where all sorts and conditions of persons come and find refuge, support, acceptance, forgiveness and love.

The only qualification necessary is a hunger, a thirst, a sense of need. The only question asked - Do you receive the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord?

We are an ecumenical community with a broad spectrum of confessional and religious backgrounds represented. We are a diverse community; every place on the continuum of discipleship is represented in this large community - and all are loved and affirmed. What we are we are, not because of traditional structures, denominational affiliates, ethnic background; what we are we are self-consciously; we have chosen to be the kind of community we have become.

Now the question confronts us anew: Will we with resolute intention broaden, deepen and expand this community? Will we keep the story going and growing?

Let me suggest that we need always to do two things: We need, first of all, to be open to all people, no questions asked, no conditions demanded. We must always be giving our life away. This must always be a place where one can come with nothing to offer, nothing to give; a place where one can enter gingerly, remain anonymous, simply be.

Secondly, there must always be some who will hear Jesus' invitation to discipleship and respond joyfully making sacrifice, giving the building of this community and the larger community of Christ top priority and undivided attention.

That brings me to the personal application of this message. Let me ask you: Do you have that sense of identity as a member of this body that is the result of an

experience of grace and then the desire to share, to mediate that grace? Do you choose to be identified with an open, gracious community of God's people?

Further: Have you come to the point of intentional resolution to total commitment to the building and ongoing development of this community?

Do not think I identify the Kingdom with Christ Community. We participate in the Kingdom of God but are not synonymous with it. Nor do I think one's commitment to Christ Community is the only way to give first place to God's will and purpose in one's life.

I do, however, believe God is in this community. I do believe grace is mediated here. The Spirit is moving here, the Gospel is proclaimed and lives are transformed here, and I believe this is one concrete arena in which to live out one's discipleship.

Many are doing just that. Over the years there has been a core that has borne the heat of the day, shouldered the load, made it all possible. Sometimes one deeply involved would say to me, "Why are there not more?" I always smile and reply, "It only takes a few."

No one is coerced into discipleship. There must never be angry reaction when rejection is experienced. And not everyone is at the point of total commitment.

But, there are always those who are ready to make that move. In these weeks there will be special opportunity to enter a new level of discipleship and ministry. It is an exciting time and the joy and rewards are great.

An Old Testament prophet knew himself to be claimed by God, called to be God's servant, even to suffer voluntarily on behalf of others. Confident God would support him, he set his face like a flint.

Jesus knew himself to be the Servant of the Lord. He knew the inevitability of what lay before him, but he did not flinch; he set his face resolutely towards Jerusalem.

Identity. Intentionality.

Jesus invites us to discipleship, to create here a place of grace, with self-conscious intention. Let us commit ourselves anew to our ministry.