

GOOD MORNING! IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

Thus says God, the Lord,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it:
I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a 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.
I am the Lord, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to idols.
See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth,
I tell you of them.

Since my wife Laurie isn't here today, I can let you in on a little known secret: Every morning when she wakes up, she opens my eyelids and stares at me intently and utters "Good morning! It is not about you today." The first few times I found it startling and didn't know what she meant, but after nearly 20 years, I have come to understand what she is talking about.

For most people, especially baby boomers like me, we have been told by our culture that everything is about us. From the time we were knee high we have been told to grab all the gusto we can, to eat, drink, and be merry, and that every time we made even the smallest sacrifice we should be noticed and given a standing ovation. It's all about me has become our mantra, though few of us are willing to admit it.

The other day I walked into EG Salon in Middletown. My wonderful wife had given me a gift certificate for Christmas to use however I wanted. I love classy salons: When you walk in they treat you like royalty and if you are a regular they greet you by name. When I walked up to the counter I told the receptionist that I was there for a perm and a color, and everyone in the salon laughed. It's the same self-deprecating lame joke I use every time, and they always laugh like it is the first time they heard it. Of course I am not there for my hair (or lack thereof), I am there for a deep tissue massage because I deserve it!

Sometimes we treat the church like it is a salon. We go and look at the menu to see what it has to offer me and my family. So churches are in the business of meeting needs, and those needs are all over the map. Everyone wants to be known by name, though individuals themselves may not want to know everyone's name. We want the minister to know all of our needs, and if he or she doesn't then it is because the minister is uncaring. We want programs to be there for us when we want them, but we aren't willing to do what it takes to make those programs work.

In some churches they are all about offering personal salvation for individuals, but yet they have little concern for the physical needs of people who are lacking the basic necessities of life. The church becomes a place where we go to feel good about ourselves, and I have no problem with that. The church is not the place to

burden people with unnecessary guilt. The church should be a place where we come to receive healing from our brokenness, comfort from our afflictions, and forgiveness for our sins. Religion should offer help to people suffering from depression, sorrow, anxiety, guilt, and existential dread. That is, after all, the model that Jesus gave us as he went from town to town, in synagogues and temples, bringing sight to the blind, freedom for the prisoners, and forgiveness to sinners.

But the richness of life is not found in pursuing a religion that is all about meeting our own personal needs. Even if we were to spend every waking hour caring and pampering our own self, it will never be enough. A hole will still remain and the existential dread will still bubble up to the surface.

The whole purpose of being healed from the dis-eases that life brings is not so that we can fill good about ourselves. Again, I have no problem with the notion that we should feel good. I like to feel good, which is why I get massages and eat good tasting food and buy nice shoes that make my feet feel comfortable. I buy expensive goose feathered pillows and sleep on an expensive mattress so that I will feel good in the morning. But I still need Laurie to remind me that the rest of the day isn't about me!

Next week Laurie is going in for surgery and some of her coworkers have offered to make meals for our family. At first we wanted to say no, because believe it or not I can cook. Yes, Laurie does bring me coffee and breakfast every morning, she packs my lunch every day, and she cooks dinner almost every night, but it isn't because I am incapable. She does it because she loves me. So we decided to have her friends make meals because people want to show their love for her, and it is a good thing for people to show that they care.

People, whether they are church goers or atheists, want to be part of something that is bigger than they are. Why do so many people care about the health of the planet even though the planet will out-live them? Why do people who are privileged care about the civil rights of others less fortunate? Could it be that in every soul there is a divine spark that wants to better humanity, even if it means making personal sacrifices?

The best advice we can give to a person who has become overwhelmed with pain, sorrow, guilt, or depression is to encourage them to step out of themselves and to help meet the needs of others. One of the keys of successful living is to lose ourselves in a cause that is greater than us.

If I could I would give Laurie to each one of you so that you could wake up with her every morning and you could feel her opening your eyelids and tell you in her sweet and gentle way “It’s not about you today.” But instead what I can offer you is the prophet Isaiah saying to you:

“Don’t be afraid, I’ve redeemed you.

I’ve called your name. You’re mine.

When you’re in over your head, I’ll be there with you.

When you’re in rough waters, you will not go down.

When you’re between a rock and a hard place,

it won’t be a dead end—

Because I am God, your personal God,

The Holy of Israel, your Savior.

I paid a huge price for you:

all of Egypt, with rich Cush and Seba thrown in!

That’s how much you mean to me!

That’s how much I love you!

I’d sell off the whole world to get you back,

trade the creation just for you.”

So remember: It’s not about you, or me! It is all about what God has done and about what God is still doing, and God is calling us to be a light for the world, bringing sight to the blind, freedom for the captives, shelter for the homeless, hope for the hopeless, and food for the hungry.

What a great way to wake up and start a New Year!