

I hope each one of you is planning to come to our Annual Meeting tomorrow night. Members and non-members alike—come and enjoy the celebration. (Just please check out the alphabet list of what to bring so we don’t end up with 159 salads.) Members may vote on church business; each one of you is welcome. Child care will be provided.

This is always the natural time of year for us as a church to reflect upon our life together. We have so much to be grateful for. Like other churches, we are not perfect. (Other churches do not have perfect church bulletins or newsletters.) Here are a few bloopers from some of theirs:

- Congratulations to Tim and Rhonda on the birth of their daughter from October 12 thru 17
- Newsletters are not being sent to non-members because of their weight
- Thank you, dead friends.
- Janet Roberts has volunteered to strip and refinish the communion table in the sanctuary
- Sermon outline this week: 1) Name your fear 2) Face your fear 3) Displace your rear

I hate to start sounding negative at a time like this, but what if I were to tell you “I get discouraged” when I reflect upon our church. We heard even the prophet, the author of Isaiah 49, admit “I have labored in vain. I have spent my strength all for nothing.” Surely you have gone thru periods of discouragement, too.

“I have labored in vain.” Translation: “I have been working night and day” here and look at what we all have to show for it. After all our best efforts—Bible Studies, Retreats, worship, everything—right now we are showing a net loss of 11 members; our covenant giving for this year is about \$36,000 off what our members promised at this time last year.

We all know we have a God-appointed mission to be His light in the darkness of this world. We all promise to pray every day. We’ve been promising for ten years to “move toward tithing” and if we all tithed we could convert the house on the corner to the church space we so badly need with so many little ones now and so many teenagers, given how beautifully Carol and Nola and Mary have seen their ministries growing. In fact we could just about buy an adjacent new house, free and clear, every year, if we wanted to. We could be supporting missionaries to go forth to the nations all around the globe; never mind that—in fact we would expect God to be sending more of us to go forth as missionaries. If we were serious about choosing our six, praying for them, reaching out to them, extending ourselves, by now we would have kids overflowing out of Mertz Hall every Wednesday night so we’d be needing all those houses. We would have at least three packed out Worship Services every Sunday without a spot to spare in the pews. And talk about the 80/20 rule: some of you are so very committed, so generous, so loving...And we could always be doing better, as a congregation, at visiting a number of our members who are confined. In general: we are supposed to be lighting up CdM, the world, for the glory of God. “I just get so discouraged...” (In fact, I guess

the blooper from the pastor in another church sums it up: “I am so very grateful to be serving in such a losing church.” And of course I can’t keep “playing pretend” any longer—it’s killing me to keep this up. The fact is I enjoy coming to my study every morning, look forward to being with you all every day.)

If I were to start preaching, or even thinking this way, I hope you would do several things. Tell me to lose the negative new attitude, quick (to lose the sinful attitude, to be accurate—which is not trusting in God) and get back to praying. If I do not see or pray with the eyes of God I have no business preaching to you and you have no business listening to me. (Even if I were accurate in my assessment, I would be inappropriate for several reasons: on the whole, you are the ones who are here worshiping, who are still alive, who are generous, who do not forget every December that if you don’t turn in your covenant you are no longer a member.) You should tell me to quit whining and accept my responsibility: if I am Senior Pastor, I am responsible for the nurture and health of my flock (“pastor” means “shepherd.”) (You might even tell me, in your own blooper fashion, “We are not that grateful to have such a losing pastor.”) And this morning, I hope you would tell me to go back and study this lesson from Isaiah a little more carefully, since obviously I would have been missing the whole point.

You’d be right. And as a matter of fact, I have studied this lesson carefully. (A quick observation, first. Our lesson is confusing as to who is speaking, and who is the servant, Israel, being referred to. When it is the prophet, and when the author, and when it is the plural covenant people, Israel, is not always clear. We know this is “the servant of God” [3] speaking—so we can relate. Like this prophet, this servant, each one of you and I have a God-assignment; each of us who has been baptized has been deputized to serve the Most High King. This church has an assignment. We all exist to love and to serve God.

The prophet writing has known deep discouragement. (“I have labored in vain”) This tells us the prophet has gone all out for God. Have you ever known this particular discouragement—not of rust or dry rot, but of long-term exhaustion? We hear how the discouragement is the worse because the speaker is so clear about God’s assignment for him and how God called him from his mother’s womb to do it and how God has provided what is necessary for the prophet to accomplish it. But He feels nothing is bearing fruit. Here God has made his tongue “a sharp sword,” and at times it can’t cut thru warm butter—his words aren’t inspiring anyone to get up and move out and obey God. God made his ministry to be a polished arrow, but at times he can’t hit the broad side of a barn. All his considerable efforts were feeling wasted.

(It’s one thing if we don’t know what our God-ordained assignment is, or when we don’t believe God has provided us everything we need to do it. But the sadness is the greater when we know God has called us to something specific; when God has provided us all the resources we need to “get after it,” to pursue what God has sent us to do. Many people around us know sadness and anxiety and even depression—the kinds of things which result from our condition of sin and separation from God, and from the resulting aimlessness or restlessness of not knowing what we are here for and therefore never ever feeling fulfilled. Many feel discouraged because they have never extended themselves, never ventured. But the prophet’s discouragement is the opposite.)

His lament is more focused: he feels his God-given gifts and his prodigious efforts have been wasted. Nothing has come of his efforts, his life poured out trying to

serve God. People who don't much care, have never "gone to the wall" for their faith will never know this sort of frustration. Maybe you have taught Sunday school for years, maybe served on one of our boards. You have yearned for others to know the quality of community and the freedom of life in Christ you are now living. It breaks your heart that your friends don't seem to care in the slightest about your Jesus. You have invited them to come to worship with you. You have been praying hard, passionately, expectantly, for years. You have gone to the wall, taken risks for God. You have been generous financially. What do you have to show for it? What does the church have to show for it all? Maybe not what you would have liked. If you are vulnerable to this same frustration of faithfulness, of having given it your all, I hope you feel complimented. (But not discouraged...we're getting to that.)

Interesting how God responds to this particular discouragement. The servant is about ready to offer his resignation: "It feels like I can't shoot straight, I can't persuade anybody, I couldn't light a campfire with a flamethrower. I've about had it. You want my resignation, God?..." "Please?" And God, as He so often does, responds backward, or at least in His ways that are not our ways. "You can't light a campfire, so I'm assigning you to be a blazing bonfire to all the nations, all the world."

It's enough to make you wonder. The servant is feeling like a failure, trying to resign his commission—because He has tried to be faithful—and God says, "Great, I'm promoting you. We're going to step it up a notch together, a hundred notches." It's as if God does not even hear—God does not realize—that this servant feels such a failure. (Maybe you have felt it happen yourself, now that you are intent on following Jesus. You are frustrated that you have not been nearly as faithful in your prayer life as you would like to be. You know you suffer the consequences more than anyone. Maybe you have not accepted or completed the assignments you have clearly understood God asking of you. But instead of God giving up on you, letting you off the hook, you sense God is calling you to pray with more frequency, more intensity, more passion. God will not let you go until you are praying like you mean it! Just when you were beginning to think you were spending too much time "doing church," feeling it was getting stale, God starts hinting to you that you are to step it up. Or conversely: maybe you are here this morning not because you want to join Christ's church or serve His church or strengthen His church—and not because you are all that crazy about Jesus—but because you've tried staying away from Him, and God will not leave you in peace. To stay away from Him is not working for you. So here you are. (Welcome—you're in the right place. I suppose almost every one of us has also tried that strategy, at one time or other, of keeping our distance...It didn't work for us, either.)

It's strange. The prophet feels he has failed at his little assignment—to get some of the people around him to pay attention to God. So God tells him he's to blaze his light to the ends of the earth for the glory of God. It's as if God does not understand what failure is. Or maybe that God does not reckon failure as we humans do. Or maybe...that God knows the only failure is when we refuse to try, refuse to step forward, refuse to speak the word, shoot the arrow, shine our light. We only fail when we refuse to obey God.

And maybe the reason God does not acknowledge failure the way we do is that every time we fall short, every time we feel we fail—whether in accomplishing our daily "to do list" or in accomplishing our career goals or meeting our annual budget—every

time we may feel discouraged, God is wanting to remind us: if we persist, if we pay attention, as we actively pray, and obey, and trust in the Spirit of God, and follow as He leads from within and above, there is no failure. God is delighted. The only failure comes when we disregard God and His plans and His future for us. Whenever we are satisfied with such small accomplishments—however large they might be in our own eyes, however large the budget or in the eyes of others—that we can accomplish them solo, without God, it is no success in God’s eyes. (It is no deep satisfaction to us, either: like the young lawyer finally “making partner” and having no one to take out to dinner to celebrate.)

Our failures, our frustrations, our deepest discouragement (borne of having given a lot) may always be redeemed when we see them as God does: as His deeper invitation to us to partner with Him anew, with His living Spirit. He keeps calling us to shine our light, His light: in our tasks, our careers, our relationships, our inviting others into our church, our lifework, our “vocatio.”

God reckons success or failure thru the divine lenses of relationship, partnership, obedience, love. So we keep relying on the divine partnership, we keep striving toward the call God places upon our lives, individually and as a church. We keep remembering it is God who makes our speech effective; God who sends the arrow straight to its mark, God who lights the fire. It is God who has established this church in this place; God who has called us from our mother’s womb, God who empowers us, God who accompanies us, God who indwells us, God who is able. (He keeps awaiting our whole-hearted permission, our eager partnership—then fasten your seatbelts!)

God knows we have every reason to be hopeful together. Imagine, after all, that lone prophet; imagine also the covenant people Israel, an insignificant few tribes far off the beaten track—enslaved in Babylon, later despised by Rome, “nothings” in the scheme of world history—and remember they actually did manage, in time, to bring the saving Light of the gospel to all the nations. (You and I are living proof: we live a long way from Jerusalem.)

See what is possible to us, individually and as a congregation, as we obey God. Israel was effective in shining the Light because the Sovereign God chose them and appointed them and kept working thru them to accomplish His mission. Thru His people Israel the Messiah was born, who has sent His Spirit to lead us in His Way, to shine His Light thru each of us. (God is by no means finished—we know the darkness all too well to think His work, our work, is done—but the point is that God causes His purposes to be worked out; God does accomplish His plans in partnership with His faithful servants. God is delighted as we respond in obedience.)

The sequence, the order of what we heard is also instructive. Did you notice what follows and overcomes his feeling of discouragement? “I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength all for nothing...Yet surely my cause rests with the LORD, and my reward is with God.” God will do these amazing exploits thru His servant—reunite and call home the scattered, Exiled people Israel—because His servant recognizes “...I am honored in the eyes of the LORD” and [“God has become my strength.”]

When he feels he has given his all, feels sapped and spent, he remembers he rests in God’s hands; the only audience he cares about is His God. He remembers he is honored in the eyes of God, and God is his strength. Apart from God, nothing we do matters. Our success, our achieving our mission is all about what God does thru us. The

servant is reminding us: “Being comes before doing.” “Who we are governs what we do.” [This is why we begin with the foundation of prayer every day. You are reminded, you experience it afresh every day: “you are honored in the eyes of the LORD.” This is why this church invests in the very time-intensive, labor-intensive, dollar-intensive commitments to Bible Studies and Retreats and Christian Education and Logos and other ways of building up God’s most valued programs and resources—each one of you.]

To rush out and start with “doing” is backward. When we recognize who we are in Christ, when we more and more actively, deeper and deeper, let it seep into our being that “God is our strength,” then our obedience will bear good fruit. Then our fears will melt away. Our abiding in Christ, obeying His every command to us thru the Spirit—not our working our own really good plan to exhaustion, bears His good fruit. As we freely obey, discouragement vanishes.

[A faithful husband, a faithful wife, will work themselves to exhaustion, literally to death, for their family, when they are convinced they are needed and beloved and that what they are working toward is benefiting those whom they deeply love. Their circumstances may be dismal, but circumstances cannot hold them back because they are clear why they are making such great sacrifice, and they offer it willingly—lovingly—for each other, for their children. This same bond holds true of soldiers, miners, football players, school teachers. How much more we children of God will persevere in His service, when we really “get it,” deep down, that God loves us, God is counting on us, God is our strength, God renews us and re-energizes us as we pour ourselves out for God’s express purposes. What could tire or discourage you when you are serving your Lord?]

All this leads to the specific question: what would you say are some of the ways we, this church, are called to shine God’s Light? First, as we heard from the prophet, this is a “being” question rather than a “doing” question. Our light shines first by our daily lives, by our quality of being—when people calling themselves “Christians” live exactly the same as everyone in the culture, how could those outside ever tell? When so many around you define themselves by what they buy, what they drive, what they own—you shine when you define yourself as one beloved by the Father. It is enough—it is all there is.

When so many around you are insatiable, never satisfied, needing edgier, more expensive, bigger, better—you shine when you are satisfied as you live in perfect hope that your every single God-given desire will be perfectly satisfied. (For some it will be in the life to come. [C.S. Lewis: “A person’s hunger does not prove that s/he has been fed, but it does prove there exists bread.” Our desires have their divine fulfillment.]

When your neighbors are always nervous, safeguarding, vigilant over all they possess, all they have to lose, you shine when you rest content in the Treasure you already possess, the Pearl of great price, which can never be taken from you. You shine in the darkness when your life radiates gratitude to Jesus.

The earliest Church at Antioch, were known contemptuously as “those people who have been turning the world upside down.” [Acts 17:6] They were accused of living as if there were another King above the emperor—King Jesus. But how did their neighbors ever know? Because of their enthusiasm for worshiping and gathering together in His name, because of their uncontrollable excitement about the new life the Spirit of the risen Christ was leading them into. Because obeying Him caused them to revamp

their habits, their customs, setting their conduct in sharp relief against the lives and conduct of their neighbors. Because their yearning for more of God was so apparent they would pay any price to worship and honor and obey Him. They stood out because the Holy Spirit was so alive in them overhauling their old lives the dead couldn't miss it. The officials certainly couldn't!

But the servant's "being" surely led to his "doing." Something's wrong if our faith bears no fruit. The prophet did go forth as he was sent; he did proclaim the word, he did shine the Light of the LORD. The earliest church also aroused the grudging admiration of their enemies: "See how they love one another." During times of persecution or famine the churches could be counted on to stick together, to support one another, to feed one another—and to take care of their doubting neighbors as well. Their neighbors surely noticed it, until within a few short centuries there were more Christians than there were adversaries left to turn them in to the authorities.

To learn of new hands-on service opportunities, by all means come to the Annual Meeting tomorrow night. Our Boards of Christian Evangelism and Christian Mission will be offering new hands-on possibilities. The building and the kitchen are going to need lots of attention in 2006. But you know you already are His missionaries; you already have been sent out, to shine His light and be His light wherever you are.

If God is leading you, there are always ways to do more. But the only possible failure is when we fail to rely on Him and do as He bids us do. Sure, we all see a few details that need some attention. (More of that tomorrow night.) But I know many of you are exceedingly faithful in your prayers, which is the start. Many of you are very generous financially. Many of you are eager for others to encounter Jesus and grow in Him as you have encountered Him and grown here. Many of you pay a high price to be faithful in your service to our Lord and to this church—and I know many of you very much love being this church. We have every reason to be greatly encouraged. As long as God is God, and we are trusting in Him and offering ourselves in obedience, His purposes for us and in us cannot fail. It is a great adventure living out His life, His Way, with all of you.

By the way. I am very grateful for you, and that you are such a "loving" church. With a "v."

**Isaiah 49:1** Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me. He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

But I said, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward with my God."

And now the LORD says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and my God has become my strength--he says, "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."

