

"An Advance Man" A Sermon based on Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-11 and John 1:29-42, delivered by the Rev. Alison Andrea Young on Sunday, January 18, 2026 at The First Congregational UCC of Onekama, MI

We are all aware, I think, that whenever a VIP, a Celebrity or a famous entertainer are about to come to town there are various people that come ahead of them to promote their imminent arrival and pave the way for them. The divine wisdom of God was well aware of this need in the art of catching the attention of humankind. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, it was just a short six months after John, the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah, was born in the hill country near Nazareth. The lives of these two cousins were basically sealed together when they were still in their mothers' wombs. As it says in our Isaiah passage this morning, "Before I was born the Lord called me, from my mother's womb he has spoken my name," (Isaiah 49:1b) John was to go ahead of Jesus, to be Jesus; "Advance Man." Afterall, John was said to have "leaped" in his mother's womb when he heard Mary's voice!

We can see clearly in our John passage that the people who became the first disciples probably would not have paid much attention to Jesus if Cousin John had not prepared them for Jesus' arrival at the Jordan. These first disciples of Jesus had been John's disciples and so they believed John when he announced, "This is God's Chosen One" (v. 34) and "Look, the Lamb of God!" (v. 36) They trusted John, Jesus' "divine advance man," and followed Jesus back to where he was staying and spent the whole day with him.

John and Jesus, became a powerful tag team for God in bringing people to accept Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. Jesus and John both accepted "God's calling from their mothers' wombs" and thus began the holy movement, first just simply called "The Way" which eventually became the Christian church.

Both Jesus' and John's divine destiny as servants of the living God can be seen in our Isaiah passage this morning, which is the second of what are called the "Servant Songs." These "servant songs" in Isaiah were meant to bring strength and comfort to the exiles. They were meant to speak of freedom and to "preach good news to the oppressed and release to the captives." (Isaiah 61:1) The songs were meant to encourage Israel to sing a new kind of song—a song not of military conquest, or of empty nationalism based on some kind of "supremacy," but a new song which would serve to "raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore the survivors of Israel." (Isaiah 49:6b) Thus, we have here, in the servant songs, a type of Hebrew spiritual, not unlike the

spirituals of the heritage of our African-American brothers and sisters as they struggled against being exiled against their will, torn from their native country and forced into slavery in this country—a struggle which, although greatly alleviated—is still on-going.

The biblical witness reminds us that this "new song" is only possible because of the nature of our relationship with God—a relationship so intimate that God is seen as the God "who called" us before we were born, and who "named us" while we were in our mother's wombs. (Isaiah 49:1b-c) there is hardly any more intimate being than that! This idea of such intimacy is far from new to the writer of Second Isaiah, the prophet of our passage. This idea, the background music of this new type of song, reaches back to 1050 B.C.E. and the calling of the boy priest, Samuel, before he is even conceived in his mother Hannah's womb (1 Samuel 1); resonates through the call of the prophet Jeremiah, in 627 B.C.E., "Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations, . . . ' " (Jeremiah 1:5); and was literally sung about in the book of Psalms which were compiled for the post-exilic temple worship around 520 B.C.E. Our Psalm for today, Psalm 40 is even written "For the Director of Music" and declares that God has "put in a new song in my mouth, . . . " ! And, who of us is not familiar with the haunting lyrics of Psalm 139: "For it was you, O God, who formed my inward parts; in my mother's womb, I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made/" (vv. 13-14)

All of these melodies, musical strands from many of our ancestor's lips, finally come together in a most beautiful canticle in what we call the "Magnificat." The "Song of Mary" serves to tie all these referent melodies into a libretto of praise which point directly to the birth circumstances of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, conceived in Mary's womb through the holy Spirit's doing, and consecrated before he is even born.

Our passage in John reminds us of this. John testifies that Jesus is indeed the "Son of God" because he was told by God that "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." The servant songs of Second Isaiah then, though not explicitly referring to Jesus Christ, as Handel's Messiah might lead us to believe, are indeed

pointing to and speaking of the power of a god, whose intimacy with us, as we are conceived in the wombs of our mothers is reflected most perfectly in the Incarnation of Christ—a servant Messiah—a savior.

Tomorrow our country has set aside a day to recognize The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his work on behalf of Civil Rights and the reconciliation of all people. Like Paul, Dr. King often was forced to write from jail. In a letter dated April 16, 1963 from the Birmingham City Jail, King was writing in response to eight of his fellow clergy persons, both Christian and Jewish, who had been critical of his civil rights activities. In this letter he points to this very same prophetic tradition to which we have been referring as the basis for a life of servanthood. He says, "Beyond this, I am in Birmingham, because injustice is here. Just as the eighth century prophets left their little villages and carried their "This saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their hometown, and just as the Apostle Paul left his little village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to practically every hamlet and city of the Graeco-Roman world, I too am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular hometown. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call to aid. . . . Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea." Martin Luther King Jr. knew well how to sing a servant's song. And like his Lord and Savior, he was crucified for it.

My preaching professor, who was a black Southern Baptist preacher, could not hide his disappointment with the fact that I could not be molded into a "black male Southern Baptist preacher." This is, of course, not what I am meant to be. As, obviously, I am not male, and I am a white Anglo-Saxon mainline Protestant. For me to preach in a style foreign to and not faithful to my particular personality, tradition, and sense of God's calling would be ludicrous, indeed. But, I must confess, that when tasked with preaching about Martin Luther King Jr., I do feel slightly inadequate to the task. In African-American preaching, the sermon is "taken home" by a "sing-song" type crescendo effect called "whooping." Martin Luther King, Jr. was master of this technique. It is probably most familiar to you in his "I Have a Dream" speech where he begins a staccato program for freedom, by repeating the words "Let freedom ring ..." and mentions with more and more fervor various areas of our world that need to hear the "Good News" and how we

might make it felt with power in the world. We must be a true "light to the nations." We need to recapture the power of the prophets and the Apostles, Dr. King concludes in his letter from the Birmingham City Jail, "There was a time when the early church was very powerful. It was during that period when the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the Church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. . . they went on with the conviction that they were a 'colony of heaven' and had to obey God rather than man . . . If the Church of today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authentic ring, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century." This is a powerful call to servanthood. It was then, 63 years ago, and certainly is still what is needed today in our fractured world! It is my hope and my prayer that in solidarity with the memory of Dr. King and other martyrs for the Christian faith, we will "sing a new song," a "servant song" in which the Church claims its authentic call to be "a light to the nations," and then—doesn't just make claims, but acts on it, because our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ still is in need of "Advance Men" and "Advance Women!" Amen.