

## He Who Vindicates is Near

17<sup>th</sup> Sun. after Pent. – 09/15/24 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Isaiah 50:4-10 Pastor Keith Besel

vv. 7-8a, [Literally from Hebrew: Jesus, the Suffering Servant says,] **“But the Lord Yahweh, gives help to Me, so that I have not been humiliated; therefore I set My face as a flint and I know that I am not ashamed. My Vindicator is near!”**

### **Introduction**

✘ The winter of 1925 was a terrifying time for the residents of Nome, Alaska. After treating four cases of what originally appeared to be tonsillitis, the only doctor in town, Dr. Curtis Welch, came to a horrifying conclusion. Instead of tonsillitis, the far more dangerous and extremely contagious diphtheria had been confirmed. Without an antitoxin, the whole town of two thousand people and their surrounding native neighbors would likely be lost.

→ But the logistics of getting that antitoxin from Anchorage, which was 1000 miles away seemed impossible. All the shipping ports had been closed for the season; aircraft travel was impossible; and worse, the diphtheria antitoxin could only last six days in the freezing temperatures of the arctic. The Alaskan railroad could bring the drug to Nenana, but Nome was still some 675 miles further.

→ It was determined that the only way to save the isolated residents was to deliver the serum by dogsled. A relay of 20 teams each traveling approximately thirty miles was coordinated. It was 40 degrees below zero when the first dogsledder, Wild Bill Shannon, left Nenana with his life-bringing 30-pound package of serum.

→ For even the most experienced dogsledder, 40 degrees below zero is brutal and risky. But with so many lives on the line, Wild Bill had no choice. He set his face to the wind and peered into the bleak darkness ahead. Breaking the silence of the cold, crisp night, the crack of his whip sounded like a lightning strike as Bill cried out, “Mush!” And the clock started to tick.

✘ Every one of us has had, or will have in the future, times in our lives when the path ahead looks dark and difficult; maybe even impossible; times when we are not sure which direction we should take or whether we should take any direction at all.

→ We may not be called to bring life-saving antitoxins to a remote village in Alaska, but the circumstances ahead of us are overwhelming and dark. And that darkness is scary. When these moments come upon us, where do you and I find the strength to take that step forward? Today’s Reading from Isaiah shines a bright beacon of light into the darkness for all who believe and trust in Jesus.

### **I. Jesus set His face like flint...**

✘ This Reading in Isaiah, chapter 50 is the third of four poems in Isaiah that are widely known as the “Suffering Servant Songs”. Even to this day the Jews vigorously debate about who this suffering servant is; some believe it is Israel; some think it is Isaiah; others say it might be the yet-to-come promised Messiah.

→ But as Christians, you and I pay attention to the powerful words of these “songs” and with each successive song, the question advances more clearly into a certainty that this Servant is, without a doubt Jesus; the Promised Messiah; the One who already came into the world to redeem the world.

✘ Listen again how the Servant is depicted in this song. In verses 4–5, the Servant is described as one who sustains the weary with just the power of His word and listens to their needs. In verse five, He has not been rebellious and does not turn away from Lord Yahweh.

→ Verse six offers a stark description of the Messiah. He willingly “gives” His back and cheeks to blows and directly faces those who spit at and mock Him without flinching. There is no doubt, Isaiah is painting in advance for us a picture of Jesus, who was beaten, mocked, and spit upon, and who, through it all, did not hide His face or turn away.

→ Here’s how Matthew 27:28–31 describes the actual event some 700 years later, “And [the soldiers] stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on His head and put a reed in His right hand. And kneeling before Him, they mocked Him, saying, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’ And they spit on Him and took the reed and struck Him on the head. And when they had mocked Him, they stripped Him of the robe and put His own clothes on Him and led Him away to crucify Him.”

⊗ So what does this Servant do when He is confronted with such obstacles? Verse seven provides the answer. “I set My face as a flint and I know that I am not ashamed.”

→ Think of how Jesus was not intimidated when Satan confronted and tempted Him in the wilderness. Or how Luke 9:51 describes Jesus’ attitude of the suffering He was called to endure in Jerusalem, “When the days drew near for Him to be taken up, [Jesus] set His face to go to Jerusalem.” And then just before His arrest, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays that the cup of God’s wrath against sin would pass Him by. Yet after long hours of praying and sweating blood, Jesus stands up, looks into the darkness and cries out to His Father, “Not My will, but Yours, be done” (Lk. 22:42).

## II. Our paths ahead may be dark/deceptive...

⊗ For you and me now as believers in Christ, there are times when our paths ahead may still be dark. Most likely we have already faced a number of them. Maybe you are facing one of those times right now.

→ Perhaps you’ve endured a series of medical tests and now the diagnosis is not good. Or perhaps your employer has called you in and declared that you are a part of the next round of layoffs or “things just aren’t working out” for you to continue there. The situation may be something more common and mundane: You have a task in front of you, but you aren’t sure where to start. You and a friend have had a disagreement and you don’t know how to go about patching things up.

→ Yes, at times we have some similar connections to the Servant in Isaiah’s text today. It’s as if the world is beating us on the back and pulling our cheeks, mocking and spitting upon us. We face all of these challenges because of the state of the human heart after the fall into sin. And now, in response to these challenges, our own sinful hearts, at times, bring doubt and fears before us and we ask the question, “Does God really care?”

⊗ The Stoics would tell us just to “endure”. One of the most famous Stoics, Marcus Aurelius, once said, “Everything that happens is either endurable or not. If it’s endurable, then endure it. Stop complaining. If it’s unendurable, then stop complaining. Your destruction will mean its end as well.” We’ve all heard the not-so-helpful “stoic” mantras, “Just buck up buttercup” or “Brush off the dirt and get back out there.”

→ Another earth-based approach is that of the Epicurean philosophers at the same time; at the time of the New Testament. They would tell you not to get too attached to anything in this world because someday it will all be gone. “Just live for today – eat, drink and be merry.” But that offers no hope, because a life without any deep, meaningful attachments is a life with no joy.

⊗ Sadly, many well-meaning Christians will chime in with their own common and over-simplified answer: “Simply get down on your knees and pray,” they say. “And if that doesn’t work, then pray harder; trust harder.” Their direction is to dig inside of yourself for more strength and you

can get through whatever struggles you might face. These people are no better than wolves in sheep's clothing.

### III. The Servant reconciles to the Vindicator

- ⌘ The Servant in Isaiah 50, however, provides a far greater; objectively better way forward. The key is found in verse eight. It might seem over-simplified at first. For the Servant simply says, "My Vindicator is near." Now, we've already established that the Servant is Jesus, right? So, why does He need to be vindicated? Why is it important to Jesus that His "Vindicator" is near?
  - ➔ First of all, real quick: the Hebrew word at the root of this term is צַדִּיק (tsadek) which means "to be righteous or just". So the "Vindicator" is the One who justifies or proclaims one to be right with God and innocent of all guilt.
  - ➔ So, for His own sake, Jesus needed no vindication. He is already the sinless Son of God; the second person in the One Triune God. His standing before the heavenly Father has always been secure. But for your sake and mine, when bleak times are ahead of us, it is crucial that we see two things in God's justification of Jesus.
- ⌘ First, we must understand that the core cause of all doubt and apprehension is our separation from God when we fell into sin. There was a time when mankind walked with God in the "cool of the day" (Gen. 3:8). We had no worries or concerns because God was "walking in the garden" beside Adam and Eve every step of the way. They knew that they were His beloved. But when they brought sin into the world, that close relationship with God was broken. So, now when trouble comes, we quickly doubt whether God really does walk with us. "Why would He stay with someone like me?" "I am beyond even God's ability to love." That separation from God...that is precisely what Jesus took upon Himself on the cross and why He cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Mt. 27:46).
  - ➔ But secondly, we must remember that God sent the Servant into the world to pay for and provide vindication for all His beloved creation. Jesus was fully human and fully divine, but He allowed Himself to rely solely on the promises in God's Word.
  - ➔ In our flesh, Jesus endured real fleshly difficulty; real human anguish. Confronting Satan in the wilderness, He was truly tempted. Before heading to Jerusalem, He absolutely struggled internally. In the garden, Jesus audibly cried out to God to take the cup of wrath away. But through it all, God who vindicates, was near. So Jesus set His face like a flint; that is with sharp and rock-like determination, and He headed straight to Calvary.
  - ➔ That's where Jesus, by His suffering and death, vindicated you and me; so that we are now proclaimed innocent of guilt and reconciled back together with God. Our relationship of love is restored. God is with us; walking at our side once again.
- ⌘ You see, the cure for dark times is to remember that this same Jesus, the Servant, has walked through the darkness before you and me. He who needed no vindication nevertheless trusted His Father to do just that; to declare Him the very Son of God by raising Him from the dead (Rom. 1:4). Jesus – obeying His Father perfectly; dying in our place; rising from the grave – has done it all! It's not our job to vindicate ourselves. We couldn't even if we tried. Our role is to trust the same promises of God that Jesus trusted – that according to His will; His way and in His time, God will vindicate us and publically declare that we are His beloved children.
  - ➔ So, when the guilt of sin is overwhelming, remember ... your Vindicator is near. When the diagnosis is difficult ... remember your Vindicator is near. Whatever the darkness, the difficulty, the overwhelming road ahead may be ... remember your Vindicator is near! Have no fear; Jesus, your Vindicator is always near!

## **Conclusion**

✘ It was 2:00 in the morning when Gunnar Kaasen and his team arrived in Nome, Alaska. After the work of 20 dogsled teams, five grueling days, and 675 miles, the antitoxins finally arrived into the hands of the doctor. The town would be saved. But it wasn't without a cost. A few of the dogs died, and a few of the dogsledders had severe frostbite. Today, the annual Iditarod dogsled race in Alaska is run to commemorate the accomplishment of this feat in 1925.

→ But for us Christians, our victory was won in the year 33 AD, when Jesus, the Servant, conquered Satan, broke through death and won eternal life in victory over all sin. Yes, even in our sins; even in our doubts; even in the very real troubles that sin and this world throw at us, we are vindicated because our Vindicator is always near. To God be the glory. Amen.