

Rev. Dan Welch Pentecost 17
9-16-18 Text- Isaiah 50: 4-10

The winter of 1925 was a terrifying one for the residents of Nome, Alaska. After treating four cases of what appeared to be tonsillitis, the only doctor in town, Dr. Curtis Welch (no relation!), came to a horrifying conclusion. The extremely contagious *diphtheria* had been confirmed. Without an antitoxin, the whole town of two thousand people and their surrounding native neighbors likely would be lost.

The dilemma was made even worse by that the fact that shipping ports had long 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 closest source of the drug was Anchorage, Alaska, one thousand miles away. The Alaskan railroad could bring the drug as far as Nenana, but Nome was still 675 miles away from that town.

The decision was made. The only way to save the isolated residents was to deliver the serum by dogsled. A relay of twenty teams each traveling approximately thirty miles was coordinated. It was forty degrees below zero when the first dogsledder, Wild Bill Shannon, left Nenana with his life-bringing thirty-pound package of serum.

For even the most experienced dogsledder, forty 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 cracking of his whip sounded like a lightning strike. As Bill cried, "Mush!" the clock was running.

For every one of us, there are times in life when the path ahead looks very dark and extremely difficult. There are times when we're not sure which direction we should take or whether we should take *any* direction at all. We'll probably never be given the task of bringing life-saving antitoxins to a remote Alaskan village, but we are called into the darkness, and the darkness is frightening. When these moments occur, where do we find the strength to move forward? Our reading for today will help shed some light on this.

Our Old Testament lesson for today is from Isaiah chapter 50. This is the third of what are widely known as the "Servant Songs" in Isaiah. In the Jewish world, there's a debate as to whether the Servant is Israel, Isaiah, or the promised future Messiah. But as Christians, we hear the witness of the texts themselves. Each of the songs paints a picture of the Servant. And with each

successive song, the reader becomes more and more convinced that the Servant is Jesus, the Promised Messiah, who came into the world to redeem the world.

The prophet Isaiah is inspired by God to give us a clear, vivid picture of our Savior. In verses 4 and 5, the Servant is described as one who sustains the weary and who listens. In verse 5, He has not been rebellious and does not turn away. Verse 6 offers us a **stark** description of the Messiah; one who **suffers**. He offers His back and cheeks to blows and doesn't hide His face from the mocking and spitting. Without a doubt, this **is** a picture of Jesus, who was beaten, mocked, and spit upon and who, through it all, did not hide His face or turn away (see Mt 27:27–31).

And what does this Servant do when He's confronted with these obstacles? Verse 7 gives us the answer. He sets His face like a flint and He is not put to shame. This is a picture of Jesus facing off with Satan during the temptation in the wilderness. It's Jesus in the days leading up to Holy Week as He sets his face toward Jerusalem. It's Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane praying that this cup would pass. But after the night of praying and sweating blood, Jesus arises. He looks into the darkness and cries out to His heavenly Father, "Not my will,

but yours, be done" (Lk 22:42).

There are times in life when **our** paths ahead look dark. I am sure you're familiar with these times. Maybe it's when a series of tests has taken place and the diagnosis is not good. Or perhaps it's the pink slip at the end of the work day. Or maybe it's just the run-of-the-mill, ordinary things that are done day after day after day that eventually wear you down. There's so much to do, and we aren't even sure where to start. In each case, we're a lot like the Servant. The world is beating **us** on the back and pulling **our** cheeks, mocking and spitting on **us**. All this reflects the human heart after the fall. And in response, our own sinful condition will, at times, bring doubt and fears into our lives, and we question whether God really cares.

The ancient Stoic philosophers would have an answer. They would tell us 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." In other words "Buck up!"

On the other hand, the Epicurean philosophers would encourage us to "Live it up! Live for today and don't get too attached to anything in this world because someday it will all be

gone!” But that doesn’t offer us any hope, because a life without attachments brings no joy.

Sadly, many Christians will also tell you that the answer is simply to pray **harder** or **trust** harder. They’ll say that if we just find more strength deep down inside, we can get through whatever struggles we face.

The Servant, though, provides an **alternative** way. The key is found in verse 8 of our reading. It’s here that the Servant says, “He who vindicates me is near.” As we’ve already established, the Servant is Jesus. So, why does **Jesus** need vindication? Why is it so important that the one who vindicates is near to **Him**? Well, for His own sake, Jesus didn’t need vindication. His standing before the heavenly Father was **always** secure. But for **our** sakes, when bleak times are ahead, it’s important for us to find two things in God’s vindication of Jesus.

First, we should understand that the root cause of all doubt is our separation from God after the fall. There was a time when we human beings, that is back when there were only two human beings- Adam and Eve, walked with God in the “cool of the day.” We had no worries or concerns because God was walking beside us every step of the way. There was no doubt that God was close and that we were His beloved. But when sin entered the world, we

broke that relationship with God, and now we doubt whether God really does walk with us, some doubt if God really does care for us. That separation from God is exactly what Jesus took upon Himself on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46).

But second of all, we should remember that God sent the Servant into the world to provide vindication for us, His beloved. Jesus was fully human and fully God, but He allowed Himself to rely only on the promises of God’s Word. When Jesus confronted Satan in the wilderness, there was temptation. Before He resolutely set off to Jerusalem to die for us, He must have paused. On the night before, in the garden, Jesus cried out to God to take the cup away. But God, who vindicates, was near. And Jesus set His face like a flint and headed to Calvary. There, by His atoning death, He reconciled us to God. Our Jesus restored that relationship we broke. So now God is with us! He is walking with us, again.

The cure for **any** dark time we go through is to remember that this same Jesus, the Servant, has walked before you through the darkest of all times. He who needed no vindication still 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 everything; we don't need to do anything to earn God's favor. And now we can trust the same promises of God that Jesus trusted—that in **His** time, God will vindicate **us**. He will declare for all to hear that we are His beloved children.

When the guilt of sin is overwhelming, remember that He who vindicates is near. When the diagnosis is not what we've hoped for, remember that He who vindicates is near. When the pink slip arrives or the work or school day ahead seems daunting, remember He who vindicates is near. God, Who vindicates us, is **always** near.

It was two o'clock in the morning when Gunnar Kaasen and his team arrived in Nome. After the work of twenty dogsled teams, five grueling days, and 675 miles, the antitoxins arrived into the hands of Dr. Welch. 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** dog sled race is performed to commemorate the accomplishment of this feat in 1925.

But for us Christians, **our** victory happened when the Servant, Jesus broke through death and won eternal victory. So remember, even in your sins, even in your doubts and

even when you're assaulted by all the troubles that this sinful world throws at you, Jesus has vindicated **you**, and He is near you. In His name. Amen.