

Some decades ago, a traveler stood in St. Petersburg, Russia looking for directions. The city was called Leningrad in those days and the nation was the Soviet Union. Holding out a map, he tried to find his present location comparing the physical structures with named places on his map. He saw several large churches before him and searched for these landmarks on his map. He found no trace of the churches before him on the map. A local interpreter came to assist the traveler in his confusion. “We don’t show churches on our maps,” the interpreter said. The traveler contradicted him, pointing to one church that was also marked on the map. The interpreter replied, ‘Oh, that is a museum, not what we call a ‘living church.’ It is only the ‘living churches’ we don’t show.<sup>1</sup>”

As it was for our traveler in Russia, so it becomes increasingly true in American culture today: most people don’t search for churches on their ‘maps’—both literal and figurative maps. Perhaps it’s a sign of the times that the one event in recent years when churches interested the general public, and young people specifically, was the launch of Pokemon Go. We appear as Apostles American Church on the Pokemon app. I suppose the autocorrect function goes from Anglican to Angelican to American.

But on other maps, literal and figurative, much of our city perceives churches much like a museum—out of date, a special interest, if-that’s-your-kind-of-thing type of place. Churches, even living churches, aren’t magnets for the masses in a culture whose new creed is YOLO—you only live once. //

*Still I believe the Word of the Lord spoken through the prophet Isaiah—God has given his Church to be a light to the nations.*

I believe that truth even in these recent times of shut-down conversations. I imagine you’ve noticed in recent years that certain conversation topics are off-limits or highly volatile: politics, same-sex marriage, race, to name a few. A 2015 study asked the question, ‘what group of people would it be difficult to have a natural or normal conversation with?’ Fifty-percent of American adults said that evangelical

Christians would be difficult in a normal conversation<sup>2</sup>. Another 2015 survey took the pulse of what's now considered extreme religious behavior. Over 60% of American adults believe it's an extreme behavior to try to convert someone to your faith<sup>3</sup>.

In recent years, people like ourselves—biblical, orthodox Christians—are perceived with growing suspicion. A core tenet of our faith—to share the good news of Jesus—increasingly means extremism in our culture.

We live in an era of shut-down conversations. Mention a delicate topic and the walls go up. It is a time when good and sincere words aren't reaching hearts and minds. How do we live and serve Christ in a time when good words aren't working?

Churches aren't on the maps of people's minds, hearts, the maps of their schedules and calendars. And the truth is that the people of God are searching for a map to navigate this new terrain, to live faithfully and well in a swiftly changing culture. /

We need no other map than this—the ancient and ever-new Word of the Lord. We have something better than a map, we have a personal guide who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And this God has said, "I am the Lord; I have called you by in righteousness; I will *take you by the hand and keep you.*" I need no compass if God takes me by the hand. He has called me in righteousness for these days and these times. In these days and times when words end, the witness of God's people will be their goodness, their right-living, their loving actions.

Today we begin a sermon series entitled *Virtue Renews the World*. Over the next few months, we will meditate on core virtues of our faith—wisdom, self-control, justice, courage, goodness, faith, hope, and most of all, love. These virtues have shaped women and men in the likeness of Christ for 2,000 years. In a time when our culture seems lost and moral decline proceeds at an alarming rate, we are called to be God's light in the darkness, even when a 'living church' doesn't appear on the maps of our culture. /

A civilization at risk or decline is nothing new. Human civilization has

known decline ever since Adam and Eve suffered exile from Eden. We need not think too severely of our times, thus committing what C.S. Lewis called ‘chronological snobbery.’ Nor ought we take our present situation too lightly. Many people in our country perceive the belief of biblical, orthodox Christians as irrelevant or extremist. How do we shine our light in the darkness in times such as these?

When ancient Israel faced exile, the destruction of her temple, and the loss of all things precious in Jerusalem, the Lord said to his people, ‘Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.’<sup>4</sup>

So that is exactly where I will lead us these next two months. Together we’ll search for the ancient paths of **virtue** for the sake of our witness in these times. Peter Kreeft said, “when you are edging closer and closer to the abyss, the most progressive direction is backwards<sup>5</sup>.”

Here’s a pattern you’ll see each Sunday these next few months. First, I’ve substituted the Old Testament lesson from the ACNA lectionary, choosing ancient stories that reveal the virtue of the week. The Psalm and New Testament readings will be the regularly scheduled lectionary lessons. But the Old Testament reading will be the feature reading for the sermon.

Secondly, we will focus on stories—ancient, biblical, and modern stories. I’ve been preparing for this sermon series for several months now, and one of the main lessons I’ve learned is this: we learn virtue best by stories. Principle and precept are helpful, but stories lodge in our souls. I’m not the greatest storyteller, but myself and other preachers in this series will share stories that illuminate the virtues we’re exploring.

Finally, we’ll give you a suggested way to *live* and *practice* these virtues. It would be ridiculous to *study* virtue alone. Faith (and virtue) without works is dead. So each Sunday we’ll suggest a way to take action in these virtues. Each sermon may not follow a linear pattern, but you can expect those three features the next two months: Old Testament examples, stories, and practical actions.

So with that prologue complete, let’s begin traveling ancient paths by

briefly exploring Isaiah's words this morning. Return with me to Isaiah 42 in your pew Bible [page ???]

And let's begin with the end, God's final words in this passage spoken through the prophet Isaiah: 'Behold, the former things have come to pass, and *new things* I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them.' These words have the effect of a time capsule. Jerusalem in Isaiah's time was collapsing, but the collapse hadn't arrived. Isaiah foretells the devastation of exile in Babylon, but it hadn't come yet. *Before* the exile comes, *before* the Temple falls in Jerusalem, Isaiah predicts Israel will live through 70 years of national imprisonment in Babylon.

But the devastation of exile and judgment isn't Isaiah's only message. That's what comprises the first half of his book, chapters 1-39. When you come to chapter 40, the themes of comfort, hope, and restoration appear. When Israel finds herself in a foreign land, surrounded by pagan gods, she'll still have this time capsule from Isaiah. In the midst of exile, when goodness and justice and holiness seem totally absent, God says, 'Behold the former things have come to pass, and *new things* I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them.'

In the depth of exile, God envisions the *new thing*. When his people are in exile, God speaks words about how he will re-new the world. How will God renew the world? Through his Servant, the one upon whom the Spirit rests. And my brother and sister, if you have been baptized in the Name of the Lord, then the Spirit of God rests upon you. Though these words originally meant Israel and her Messiah, the Lord Jesus, they now extend to us. We are called to be people of mercy and justice in these days. It's interesting that the Servant doesn't say very much. Verse 2: "He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice; or make it heard in the streets." We preach the Gospel everywhere we go and, only when necessary, we use words, to paraphrase St. Francis. Our Gospel is proclaimed in **actions**: that we will not break a bruised reed, that we would not quench a faintly burning wick.

And then notice the character, the virtue, the internal attitude of the Lord's servant: 'He will not grow faint or discouraged...' Am I concerned

about the state of this land in which I live? Am I concerned about the church that my daughter and son will inherit? Yes, I'm concerned. But I'm not *worried*. The Lord's people are called to *not* grow faint or discouraged. This is the time for confidence and courage, not because of our abilities or the conditions of the moment, but because Jesus Christ reigns by the right hand of the Father and he is making all things *new*. The work of restoring the nations to righteousness is not my work or our collective work—it is the Lord's work. We are his witnesses, his servants, his light to the nation—we are not the Savior.

Notice how many times the Lord uses the personal pronoun 'I' when he speaks in this passage. I'll save you the time: eight. This is the paradox of pursuing virtue as the Lord's servant. We participate in God's new creation mission by living virtuous lives, but only God completes his new creation. Can you open the eyes of a person's spiritual blindness? Can I bring someone out of their spiritual or physical prison? No—not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit says the Lord. In a time when words end, the greatest virtue we need is *dependence*. Dependence is another word for *humility*. And humility is the foundation upon which all the other virtues of our faith will be built.

You know why we don't need to be afraid if things get more difficult for orthodox Christians? Because we have 2,000 years of history of how the Lord re-newed human history through the virtues of his saints. This is who we are. In [ancient Rome] our mothers and fathers in faith rushed to the aid of those suffering from a plague while doctors and civic leaders fled for their safety<sup>6</sup>. Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy said, "we shall always find that the future of Christianity is present here and now as long as two or three Christians believe in it, and answer<sup>7</sup> [the call to begin anew]."

Recently I read an interview with a woman named Isabel who answered the call to begin anew in the humblest of ways. Isabel lives in Santa Barbara, California, having moved to the United States from her native country of Chile to be near her family. In Chile, Isabel was trained in clinical

therapy as a family counselor. Her credentials weren't recognized in the U.S., her husband couldn't find work, so she took the best full-time job available to her: cleaning houses.

The pastor interviewing Isabel asked her, "How do you see your work reflecting God's work?"

Isabel said, "If you look in the book of Genesis, in the beginning the world is in darkness. There is no order. God is a God of order—he orders every single life, changes every life from darkness to light in Jesus. And that is my motivation as I work. Everything I do is from God, not from man. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, and we are to do the same: be a servant with love. If I am cleaning a toilet—well, that is something that needs to be done to order the world and to wash the feet of others. There is no sadness about that; it's a joy. The greatest example of servanthood in my life is the Holy Spirit, because he guides me. I listen to his voice and say 'Yes, sir.'"

In the final question of the interview, the pastor asked, 'Do you encounter brokenness in the work you do?' Isabel replied, "Of course. It's sad to see people who have everything beautiful, everything perfect. They contract with you so their world can continue perfect and clean. But you realize their life is empty. So I have to be light for them. Every single home I go to, I pray for that family, that they can find him. If he will use, amen. If not, amen—he will send somebody else<sup>8</sup>."

Lord, give me a humble, loving spirit like Isabel. And to think her greatest skill is the healing of the soul within families. Help me to be a prayerful missionary like this woman, for her virtue renews the world she inhabits.

The voice of the Lord echoes across the centuries to us: 'I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness—godly character, virtue. I will take you by the hand and keep you. I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness...Behold the former things have come to pass, and *new things* I now declare; before they

spring forth I tell you of them.”

In your bulletin insert, you’ll see the list of virtues we’ll explore the next few months. Next week we’ll meditate on the virtue of wisdom. Between now and then, let’s practice humility and dependence in a concrete way. Look over this list of virtues and ask two questions:

1. Think of your world—your home, workplace, school. What virtue is most absent? Think of ways you can renew this portion of your world by practicing that virtue.

2. Read over this list of virtues and find the virtue that’s most difficult for you. Pray with a humble spirit that God would help you grow in this place of weakness.

My brother and sister, remember that we are servants, not saviors. / We are a light for the nations. But just as stars are brilliant lights in the night sky, they cannot compare to the light of the sun at daybreak. And the Son of God alone is Savior, who alone deserves glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit evermore. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> E.F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Gabs Lyons and David Kinnaman, *Good Faith*, 45.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah 6.16

<sup>5</sup> Peter Kreeft, *Back to Virtue*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*.

<sup>7</sup> ERH, 91.

<sup>8</sup> Andy Crouch, *Strong and Weak*, 69-70.