

HERE IS MY SERVANT

Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

A sermon preached by the Rev. Theodore S. Atkinson
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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

The week before Christmas I took my three sons to see *The Fellowship of the Ring* on its premier showing. For those who aren't familiar with the books by J.R.R. Tolkien or the movie, *The Fellowship of the Ring* is about Hobbits. Hobbits are small, diminutive human like creatures who ordinarily hate adventure. One Hobbit, Frodo Baggins, possesses a magic ring that corrupts all who use it. There's only one way to destroy its evil power. One must journey through a land of deep darkness, climb a volcano, and cast the magic ring into the fiery cauldron. Frodo and his companions are chosen to respond to the challenge. So Frodo sets out with several young hobbits, two men, an elf, a dwarf, and a wizard who are *the fellowship of the ring*.

The person I most enjoyed was the hobbit, Sam Gangee. Sam is an ordinary hobbit you'd never mistake for a hero. Sam was Frodo's closest friend and became his faithful servant. He was Frodo's servant but not a cringing, servile slave. He wasn't like the mindless members of the Al Qaeda terrorist organization sworn to obey whatever evil Osama Bin Laden commands. Sam Gangee pledges to follow Frodo and work with him in the mission of destroying evil and establishing justice.

Sam Gangee reminds us of what it means to be a servant of Christ. God has chosen all of us to be servants of the good Lord Jesus Christ. We're called to follow Christ and work with him to accomplish his mission to establish justice. Like Sam Gangee, we're ordinary people chosen to serve the Lord. We're ordinary people called to an extraordinary mission. Think of ordinary persons who became heroes on September 11. A window washer in the World Trade Center used his squeegee to force open an elevator door enabling five people to escape. An elderly priest knelt beside a dying fireman to administer last rights. A businessman orchestrated a plan that overcame hijackers on his plane. God chooses ordinary people, like them, to be servants of the Lord.

In our Old Testament lesson the Lord says, "Behold my servant." The people of God were called to be the collective servant of the Lord to bring forth justice to the nations. In other words, they were called by God not to exclude but to include all nations. Just as Sam Gangee followed Frodo with the hope of destroying the

evil in the world God's servants follow Jesus to bring justice to the nations. In baptism God says to us, "You have been chosen! You are God's servants." Believe it! We've been chosen to make a difference in the world.

In a few moments elders and deacons will come forward to be installed and ordained. They've been chosen to serve the servants of the Lord. When you were a kid, remember how wonderful it felt when you were chosen? When the kids were picking sides for a game of baseball, and you were chosen. Or when the phone rang and someone asked you to the prom? Or when the letter finally came from a college saying you had been chosen for admission? Or when the prospective employer said, "We had a lot of candidates, but we chose you"? You elders and deacons were chosen to serve the servants of the Lord.

God has chosen all of us to serve him. Baptism is the ordination of ordinary Christians to service. Ordinary people like you were chosen by God to play an extraordinary role in his drama on earth. We weren't chosen because we're better than people who aren't baptized. We weren't chosen because God loves baptized people more than those who aren't. So why were we chosen? Because God wants us to be God's coworkers to establish justice in the earth. *He chose us not to do exclusion of others, but in order that others might be included.*

This Sunday the baptism of the Lord Jesus reminds us that we've been baptized with his baptism. In Baptism the Lord says to us, "You are my beloved child." As God gave Jesus the Holy Spirit to equip him for his work, we're given God's power to serve him. The baptismal font is where all of us are ordained to ministry and called to serve the Lord.

I heard of a congregation that has, as one of its ministries, a drama group. Several years ago, during the Christmas season, the group performed Dickens's, *A Christmas Carol*. To the delight of all, one of the kindest members of the church, an elder and respected leader, was cast in the unlikely role of the stingy curmudgeon, Ebenezer Scrooge. In the story, you will recall, Scrooge on Christmas Eve goes through a series of terrifying and life-changing encounters with the ghosts of Christmas, experiences that cause him to repent of his cold heart and lack of generosity. As the light of Christmas Day dawns, Scrooge is a changed man. To show this transformation, the script of the play called for the actor playing Scrooge to throw open his bedroom window, to stick his head out into the light, to act as though he saw a boy walking along the street, and to beckon with joy

and excitement to the imaginary boy. "Hey boy, boy, you there. Come up here. I have something for you to do." Then Scrooge was to give gifts for the boy to distribute to the poor of London.

In the actual performance, though, when the actor thrust his head through the window of the set and said, "Hey boy, boy, you there," a young boy in the fellowship hall, sitting with his parents, half paying attention to the play, thought that Scrooge was speaking personally to him. So, when the actor said, "Come up here, I have something for you to do," the boy obediently got out of his seat and walked onto the stage. Suddenly and unexpectedly, there in the middle of the play was a child from the audience. At that point, the roles of Christian and elder overcame the role of "Scrooge," and the actor spontaneously went over to the boy and hugged him, saying, "Yes, indeed, you are the one I need, the very one." When the play was over, the cast was applauded enthusiastically, but none more warmly than Scrooge and the little boy.

This is a parable of Christian service. We're all actors in a great play, and the script of the Gospel drama repeatedly beckons to us sitting in the balcony or in the back rows of the sanctuary, maybe only half paying attention. The voice of God beckons us. God calls us to serve the Lord. "Come up here, I have something for you to do." Come up here! You are chosen! You are my beloved child! I'm pleased with you and I have something for you to do!

Let us pray: Almighty God,
you anointed Jesus at his baptism with the Holy Spirit,
and revealed him as your beloved Son.
Keep us, your children born of water and the Spirit,
faithful in your service,
that we may rejoice to be called children of God;
through the same Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.