

# Welcome

Pre-show: favorite super-hero

The most famous super-hero in the world is Superman, of course. He was sent to Earth as a baby, moments before his home planet of Krypton exploded. He lands on a farm in the American midwest, raised by humble farmers to stand for Truth, Justice and the American way. He's faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive.

But what's always been the most interesting thing about Superman isn't the super; it's the man. After all, he's basically invincible so if you want him to fight, you just have to invent another alien or give someone a kryptonite powered suit and then they can punch each other to death.

No, what actually makes Superman *super* isn't his alien abilities but his morality. Superman always does the right thing. And that's especially interesting when you can't just punch a problem.

Superman is, after all, an orphan. A child of adoption. And an undocumented immigrant.

Aaaaaand... did you know Superman was created by two Jewish kids? That's right - he's most often treated as a Jesus-figure today, but he's really more of a Moses (put in a basket, sent to another world/culture, raised by an adopted parent).

Of course, Jesus and Moses are part of the same story, and that's why I wanted to start with Superman today. Because the very best Superman writers understand something profound about Superman: he's not here to save us.

My favorite Superman writer is a guy named Mark Waid. And he said one time, "I don't want Superman to be more like us. I want *us* to be more like *him*."

For Mark (who literally writes Superman stories for a living), the best thing about Superman isn't his strength, his invulnerability or his heat vision. It's his *goodness*. The way he refuses hatred and bigotry of all kinds. The way he fights for justice on behalf of the little guy. And the way he shows us all what we could be.

Ironically, it takes a man from the heavens to show us what it really means to be human.

Today, we're going to explore that same theme. Because it's no accident we see so much of the story of God's people played out in the Man of Steel. Jesus too came not just to save us from our sins, but to show us how we were created to live.

Today, we're going to explore not what Jesus saved us from, but what Jesus saved us *for*. We're going to explore the good news that Jesus became like us so we could become like him!

## Message

Today is the first Sunday of Epiphany. We just finished celebrating Jesus' arrival in the world. Epiphany is a season when we ask what it means that Jesus is for the whole world. After all, we are Jesus' church, but Jesus isn't just for us. He's for the whole world. So what's our role in Jesus' mission?

This year, our series is called Spark! We're exploring the ways Jesus ignites our calling. What does it take to be the Church Jesus calls us to be?

It might seem counterintuitive, but to answer those questions, we're going to be spending time with the prophets of the Hebrew Bible for this series. Men who lived out God's calling among God's people.

Because the God who created and cared for this special people thousands of years ago is the same God who arrived in the person of Jesus that first Christmas, and is the same God who gathered us for worship today!

We're beginning where we should always begin, with a clear picture of who we're meant to be. I got really into puzzles over COVID, and one of the things I've noticed puzzle-makers doing these days is including small posters that feature the puzzle art. Something to have out next to you so you can see what you're doing.

I think far too often, faith feels like we're trying to do a puzzle without a guiding picture. We've got so many pieces - our own experiences, both beautiful and painful. We've got our encounters with churches (again, both good and bad). We've got the way Christians in our country behave and what they teach us to value. We've got politics and social media, our work and our families and friends. It's easy to feel lost, to wonder how it all fits together.

We'd love someone to show us. And that's exactly what we find in today's text.

Turn with us to [Isaiah 42](#).

This section of the book was written after the Exile by disciples of the original prophet Isaiah. They created a figure known mostly as The Servant.

Here's the crazy part: we don't know who this guy is. A number of scholars have tried to figure out if he's a real, historical figure - like some guy the prophets in Isaiah's school knew. But if that's true, we have no other information about him.

So most scholars today think the Servant is more of a figure the prophets created to illustrate God's ideal people. In the Servant, they found someone who could remind them not only who God is, but who God called *them* to be. The Servant is who all God's people should aspire to be.

With that in mind, let's read Isaiah's description of this Servant:

“Look at my servant, whom I strengthen. He is my chosen one, who pleases me. I have put my Spirit upon him. He will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or raise his voice in public. He will not crush the weakest reed or put out a flickering candle. He will bring justice to all who have been wronged. He will not falter or lose heart until justice prevails throughout the earth. Even distant lands beyond the sea will wait for his instruction.” -- Isaiah 42:1–4 (NLT)

The Servant is the person on whom God has put God's Spirit. And the Servant is a fierce advocate for justice, but even so, he is *gentle*. The weakest reed doesn't need to fear his touch, and he keeps his hand cupped around a flickering candle to keep it from being snuffed out.

This is a difficult task. It is long and thankless. But the Servant doesn't falter or fall.

I have to confess, friends, this is a promise I need right now. These days, I far too often feel like a weak reed or a flickering candle. I wonder how long I can keep doing the work God has called us to.

And yet, God has promised that this is what God's people look like. We lead with gentleness. We pay particular attention to the most vulnerable - the weak reeds and flickering candles.

We do that because that's what God does. We learn from the one who made us. So would you join me, weak reeds and flickering candles, as we return to our creator in worship?

## Song

If you're familiar with Isaiah's Servant, then you might be wondering why I ignored the most popular interpretation of his identity: that the Servant is a prophecy of Jesus himself.

It's easy to see why - especially as we go on to finish this passage. But I want to offer a word of caution.

Far too often, we treat prophecy like fortune-telling, as though the prophet who wrote chapter 42 was sitting at a crystal ball, looking into the future to see Jesus and describing him.

No prophecy is always first and foremost about the here and now, not the future.

Let me say that again: Prophecy isn't mainly about the future. It's mainly about the here and now.

So Isaiah was concerned in chapter 42 with the people of God in the 560s BCE, those who survived the Exile. And he was explaining to them who their God is. This God who is the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. This God of Moses and Joshua and David.

This same God is the God who now called them, even in their smallness, even in the shadow of the Empire, to be gentle forces of justice in the world.

The God who created them is the God who now calls them.

So... what about Jesus? Well, Jesus didn't pop out of nowhere. As we saw during Advent, he was part of a much bigger story, the story God has been telling since the beginning.

Jesus came to show us exactly who God is, and to enable us to be part of that same story. So with that in mind, let's read the next part of Isaiah's description of the Servant:

God, the LORD, created the heavens and stretched them out. He created the earth and everything in it. He gives breath to everyone, life to everyone who walks the earth. And it is he who says, "I, the LORD, have called you to demonstrate my righteousness. I will take you by the hand and guard you, and I will give you to my people, Israel, as a symbol of my covenant with them. And you will be a light to guide the nations.

You will open the eyes of the blind. You will free the captives from prison, releasing those who sit in dark dungeons. -- Isaiah 42:5-7 (NLT)

You might recognize that last bit there as the passage Jesus quotes in [Luke 4](#) when he announces his public ministry. That's right... this Servant poem is Jesus' big inspiration. When he considered what his life and ministry would be, he looked back to [Isaiah 42](#). He said, "This is the kind of Messiah I'm going to be. The gentle justice advocate. The one who tends to the weak reeds and flickering candles. To the blind and the imprisoned, the oppressed and the poor."

No wonder when we look at the Servant poem, we see Jesus. Jesus modeled his own ministry from it!

Which brings us back to us, today. We're a small church. We've had a long string of hard years. And we're spread out - literally - all over the country (and the world - hi to our family in Nairobi and Chihuahua City!).

I know it can be discouraging to be a small church with limited resources - the ways we want to help, to answer God's call, often far outstrip our ability to meet those needs. In this way, we're

not unlike those who endured Exile. They were small, powerless, wondering what sort of future was ahead of them.

So the prophet reminded them they have the same calling they always have. And it's something they can accomplish not because they're going to work twice as hard now that they've been through the Exile (or whatever).

No, it's because the God who created them and called them remains faithful to work among and around and within them.

And Catalyst, that remains true for us. I think basically since I came here eight years ago, I haven't had a clue what the next year would hold. (And I think the Leadership Team would back me up on that.)

So what does this year hold? I have no idea. We have a lot of changes with VIVA Preschool sharing our building, a second trip to Chihuahua City and hopefully more engagement with Rowlett. We also hope to work with our virtual congregants to imagine what service looks like for y'all right where you are.

Because our mission is the Servant's mission is Jesus' mission. We're to announce good news to the poor, justice to the oppressed, healing to the afflicted. We're to embody that good news in our own selves, homes, and community.

The trick of the Superman story is that Superman can't save us from ourselves. All he can do is inspire us, show us that even all the strength and power in the world doesn't make you a good person. That only comes from within. So the best Superman stories are about Superman showing us how to be good humans.

This is what Isaiah's Servant did too - he didn't come to rescue God's people, but to show God's people how to be God's people.

And this is what Jesus does for us: he not only saves us from sin and death, he enables us to be fully the people God created us to be!

## Communion + Examen

Jesus leads the way to this table.

Where does my life look like Jesus?

Where does my life not look like Jesus' life?

How is God inviting me to be changed this year?

## Assignment + Blessing