

## **“A Bruised Reed He Will Not Break”**

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

January 8, 2023

- <sup>1</sup> Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.
- <sup>2</sup> He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; <sup>3</sup>a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.
- <sup>4</sup> He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.
- <sup>5</sup> Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it:
- <sup>6</sup> I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations,
- <sup>7</sup> to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.
- <sup>8</sup> I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols.
- <sup>9</sup> See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.
- (Isaiah 42:1-9)

Some of the most beautiful language in the New Testament comes from the Sermon on the Mount, in a passage that has become known as “The Beatitudes.” The first words are ones of comfort: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” But then Jesus starts pushing it a little: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”<sup>1</sup>

I expect a few eyebrows raised at that one. Mark Twain once quipped that Jesus probably put that one in for the British, whose empire still spread across the world. Twain meant it as a joke. And, truth be told, most of us think the Beatitude itself is kind of a joke. As the oil tycoon J. Paul Getty, who was at the time the richest American alive, famously quipped, “The meek shall inherit the earth... but not the mineral rights.”

Back in the postwar days, a tabloid newspaper actually said, completely ironically, that they would present a gift of a framed, decorative print of the phrase “The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth” to any meek person who could prove that they had actually accomplished anything.<sup>2</sup> In our culture, meekness is not considered an admirable quality. Meek people don’t get things done; meek people get pushed around, walked over, and forgotten.

And yet, as the prophet Isaiah describes God’s servant in this passage, it is said that God’s chosen one “will not cry or lift up his voice... a bruised reed he will not break... a dimly burning wick he will not quench.” The vision starts out with such strength – this servant who is chosen by God, set apart by God, upheld by God, bearing the power of the very spirit of God, will do nothing short of bringing “justice to the nations.” What greater challenge could there be – to calm and tame all the wildness and recklessness of the world, to end every conflict in the world, to heal all the brokenness of the world, and right every wrong in

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:3-5.

<sup>2</sup> John A. Redhead, *Finding Meaning in the Beatitudes* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, ), p. .



the world? This is no job for a shrinking violet, for someone who can't take a punch, or more importantly, land a few punches of their own. No, this is a job for a superhero... someone "faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound." How could a meek person possibly bring justice into this broken world? It's a joke, right?

But Isaiah persists with resolve and assurance. "The former things," the prophet says, the things that have been, the things you have seen and experienced in the past... those things are coming to an end. God is doing a new thing. God is forging a new path.<sup>3</sup> And the One who will usher in these sweeping changes will do so with a gentle hand. He will come with a meek spirit, but he will not falter... he will not faint... he will not "be crushed until he has established justice on the earth." What you will see in him will be no joke.

It's pretty clear, actually, that "meek" is the wrong word here. If we look up the word in an English dictionary, we see the issue immediately. Someone who is meek is "not strong," "deficient in spirit and courage," "easily imposed upon," "submissive." But the Greek word Jesus uses in the Sermon on the Mount means none of those things. A better translation would be "gentle strength." It describes a person who has significant power, but who chooses to exercise that power in a reserved and controlled way, with a gentleness that avoids unnecessary harshness without compromising purpose or integrity.<sup>4</sup> It also describes someone who is able to endure pain and injury with uncommon patience and without resentment. This kind of meekness and gentleness has nothing to do with weakness; it has everything to do with balance and self-control.

This is the exact image described by the prophet Isaiah, who foretold of Christ's coming. And, as I want to say today, this is wonderful news for us... that the One who is coming to help us, to make things right, has great power and purpose, but that power and purpose will be wielded with such gentleness and care that even a barely-burning candle will not be extinguished by his passing... that even a fragile, bruised reed will not be broken by his steps.

I want to focus on that second metaphor – the bruised reed – because it is a sermon in itself. The first thing we can say about a reed is that it is, by definition, a very fragile life form. It is essentially grass – a little stronger than the blades we walk across on the lawn, but far more tender and vulnerable than even the seedling of a tree. Reeds are also very common plants, sprouting up on marsh banks and beside creeks, around tranquil ponds and in highway drainage ditches. The stems are thin and hollow and often wet, making them especially susceptible to damage. If you've ever walked through the high grass of a meadow, and then turned around to see the path you've taken, you know that the only evidence of the way you have come is seen in the stems that were bent or broken by your legs and feet. You didn't intend to break them; it was just a natural consequence of walking.

Interestingly, Isaiah's metaphor doesn't even talk about broken reeds. The image is a reed that has only been "bruised." On humans, a bruise is caused by an impact to the body. The skin may not be broken, but the blow causes damage below the surface. Specifically, the impact causes small blood vessels under the skin to rupture, and the blood that leaks out of them creates a black, blue, or yellow mark above the injury.

---

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 42:9; 43:19.

<sup>4</sup> <https://biblehub.com/greek/4240.htm>; <https://biblehub.com/greek/4236.htm>

The Hebrew word that Isaiah uses reflects the physical experience we have when we are bruised. In fact, it suggests an even greater trauma. Usually, that word is translated as “crushed.” The idea is that this poor, fragile reed may not be completely broken, but it has received a severe blow. The damage may not be readily visible, but the plant has experienced a blunt trauma so severe that, unless great care is taken, could easily break that reed for good. It must be guided back to health with gentle hands.

I think we have all felt, at one time or another, like a bruised reed. We try our best to smile and show a strong face to the world, but all of us have places in our lives where we feel vulnerable. Some of us have suffered the painful impact of some pretty severe emotional blows. Some of those wounds may be fresh; others may be very old, but sometimes even decades later, that area can still be sensitive to the touch -- that an old familiar pain can be triggered whenever something pops up to hit that dark, old bruise.

That is why it is such welcome news that the power God is sending into the world – the hero who has been equipped by heaven to bring forth justice to the nations -- will wield cosmic authority with gentle strength... that there will be power in his touch, but that touch will be so carefully and tenderly applied that even a bruised reed will be safe in his hands. His help and salvation will come to us so calmly, so gently, that even a waning candle that is barely holding onto its fragile flame will not be extinguished as we are wrapped up in God’s loving embrace.

Many of you have met our dog Lucy, who is loving life in the manse. Unfortunately, none of you got to meet our other dog Gladys, who sadly died from cancer the winter before we moved to Larchmont. Gladys was Lucy’s best friend for ten years, starting from the day when she wandered up to our back door three days before Christmas. She was just 8 or 9 weeks old at the time, so we thought she may have been someone’s Christmas puppy who wandered away and got lost. But no one answered the flyers we put up, so now we had two new puppies.

Interestingly, despite the love we gave to Gladys over the ten years she had with us, that stray dog spirit never really left her. She loved Lucy, but she did not care much for other dogs. She loved us, but she was very leery of most other people. Regardless of who you were, canine or human, if Gladys didn’t like you, you knew it. She had a sharp bark, a menacing snarl, and a great set of teeth, and she was not afraid to use all of them. Even so, Gladys took very easily to a special skill. She knew that, on occasion, if she was good, we would give her a treat. When we got one out of the jar, we would tell Gladys to sit. She knew the drill, so she would gladly comply. And then we would say, very clearly, “Gladys, gentle lips.” And we would open our hand, and Gladys would move swiftly but tenderly to softly take the treat out of our open hand. She was a big dog, a powerful dog, and her teeth were right there, but she was never more tender and sweet than when she heard the words “gentle lips.”

The gospel of Matthew, as it tells the story of the incarnation of Jesus, includes twelve “fulfillment” passages. Periodically in the story, the evangelist pauses to observe that whatever had just happened, whatever Jesus had just said or done, had fulfilled a specific prophecy. In the twelfth chapter of Matthew, after Jesus has been preaching, teaching, healing, and guiding for quite some time, Matthew makes reference to this very passage in Isaiah 42. Christ had made it clear that he had divine power. Christ had made it clear that he was ready to confront injustice, to right the wrongs and set things right. But he had done all of this with gentleness, tenderness, love, and care. He was strong but not

harsh. He was honest but not rude. He spoke but he did not yell. And, to quote Matthew, all of this served

*“to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah: “Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice... He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick until he brings justice to victory.”*

This is the good news for all of us, that even when we feel small, even when we feel as fragile as a bruised reed, or as vulnerable as a barely burning candle, the world-changing, tyrant-busting, prison-breaking power of the God of heaven and earth comes to you with tenderness, and speaks to you with gentle lips, not to break you down, but to build you up.

Thanks be to God for this incredible gift, ***Amen.***