# ***FOUR WORDS***

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# Texts: Isaiah 42:1-9 and Matthew 3:13-17

*Here is my servant!*…*This is my Son!* Those two four-word statements are separated by hundreds of years, by generations of people of faith, and by one holy birth on a silent night in Bethlehem*. Here is my servant!…This is my Son!* They are separated by language – *Here is my servant!* in Hebrew, Old Testament words. *This is my Son!* in Greek, New Testament words. Today we gather half a world away, in a different millenium, in a far different culture, and we read again these words in yet another language – English – *Here is my servant! This is my Son!* What could they possibly have in common with each other and with us?

*Here is my servant!* are the first words of the so-called Servant Songs spoken by Isaiah. They aren’t songs so much as prophecy – the Word of the Lord about a servant,

a chosen one with whom God is well-pleased,

a recipient of the Spirit of God

a bearer of justice to the nations.

*Here is my servant – my chosen.* How sweet those words of the prophet must have sounded to the people! How sweet to hear words about justice when you find yourself the victim of injustice! How sweet to hear of one chosen by God for good when in exile God’s choices seemed less than good! How sweet to hear of one who bears the Spirit of God – like King David who received the Spirit when he was anointed by Samuel and went on to do great things! How sweet to hear these four words when you are down and out – both figuratively and literally. *Here is my servant.*

There was one small problem – the identity of the servant. Who was this chosen one of God who would faithfully bring forth justice? The debate has continued for over twenty-five hundred years. Who was the servant? Some say Israel – the servant is only a metaphor for all the people of God. Some say King Cyrus of Persia who aided in the people’s return from exile. Some say someone else – an unknown figure, a particular person. Whoever he is, he is a light to the nations, a teacher, a man of sorrows and suffering, a bearer of the iniquities of us all – those too are descriptions of that servant in the servant songs. Those first words about the servant seemed so promising – *my chosen in whom my soul delights* – but they are then tempered by suffering in order to bring about justice and righteousness for all the world. *Here is my servant.*

Do not think that –

when Jesus rose up out of the water

and the heavens opened

and the Spirit of God descended like a dove to alight upon him

and the voice from heaven declared (in a big booming voice or was it a gentle whisper?), “This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased,”

– do not think that all those gathered at the riverside shouted, “Aha! Here is the servant proclaimed by Isaiah!” The similarities between Jesus and the suffering servant came, not at his baptism, but after the crucifixion and the resurrection when new light was shed on those old words from Isaiah about a suffering servant.

Not *Here is my servant!* but *This is my Son!* was the proclamation from above about the man who stood dripping wet in the midst of a muddy river through which sinner after sinner had been led by John. Here was a man who bore no outward signs of greatness, the son of a neighborhood carpenter, a cousin of John who John recognized as the One for whom he had been preparing the way. Here was a man who declined John’s plea to be the baptizer instead of the baptizee, a man who humbly and faithfully followed the path of every other baptized sinner down into the water. Here was a man whom God called Son – God’s chosen, God’s messiah, the Christ, God’s Word made flesh. When you come to the waters of baptism, Jesus has been there before you; and from those waters he went out newly empowered by the Spirit to do great things, miraculous things, saving things.

Baptism was the starting point for Jesus’ ministry. About his life before his baptism, we know very little. About his life after his baptism, we know much more – we know about miracles and teachings and forgiveness of sins and promises of eternal life and calls to discipleship; we know about his dying and rising on the third day and ascending into heaven where he sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty. Knowing all those things we look back to that prophecy of Isaiah about the servant and say, Here is God’s servant – the one coming up out of the water with John’s hand upon him. Here is God’s servant with the Spirit descending and alighting upon him like a dove. Here is God’s servant of whom God declares, “This is my Son, the beloved with whom I am well pleased.” This is the Son who is the servant,

the Son who will suffer yet save,

the Son who urges us to be servants as well,

the Son who invites us to address God as a parent,

the Son who gives to us the Spirit as a comforter,

the Son who bids us, “Come and follow me.”

Perhaps those four words – *Come and follow me!* – are God’s four words for us this day. For that is what the Son asks of us – to come and follow where he leads, to be servants of God as disciples of the risen Lord.

Jesus showed us what the path of servanthood looks like – from the waters of baptism to the highways and byways of Galilee to the cross to the empty tomb. He doesn’t ask us to go where he hasn’t already gone. He doesn’t ask us to go alone; he gives us the Spirit to guide and sustain us along the way and has promised, “I will be with you always.” But he does ask us to go –

to go and feed the hungry,

to go and heal the sick and visit those in prison and comfort those

who mourn,

to go and love God and our neighbors and our enemies too,

to go and serve those in need with humility and love.

It is not an easy way, this *Come and follow me!* path. But it is the way of the manger and the cross and the empty tomb, the way of the Son who is the servant. “*It is easier to say I am a Christian than to live every day in a Christ-like manner*,” wrote one of our elders some years ago. It is often hard to walk the talk and not just talk, but if we dare to call ourselves followers of Jesus, then we must strive to follow where he leads and to lead Christ-like lives day after day after day.

We do not walk that path alone. As Samuel Wells reminds us: “*What matters is that disciples never forget for a moment that their calling is always a partnership between themselves and God, and between themselves and one another*.”[[1]](#endnote-1) We are not solo servants! We are called to serve together, to love and support one another in our service, to share in this calling that Jesus has extended to each of us and to all of us, assured that God is with us. As Fleming Rutledge so beautifully puts it:

*That is why the Christian community is so indispensable. When we can’t pray, the community prays for us. When we have no hope, the community holds the hope for us. When our suffering seems more than we can bear, the community comes alongside us in mute witness*.[[2]](#endnote-2)

We are called to serve together, because we are stronger together, because we need each other, because that is how Jesus showed us how to serve – with 12 disciples and a host of followers by his side – there not only to learn from him, but to share in ministry with him, and that is how he calls us to serve – as a community of humble servants and faithful disciples!

We began today with four Old Testament words spoken by Isaiah – *Here is my servant!* And with four New Testament words spoken at Jesus’ baptism – *This is my Son!* And we heard four words spoken by that Son who is the servant and God’s beloved, saying to you and to me – *Come, and follow me!* Now there are a host of four-word responses to this call to come and follow that you can offer. You can say:

I am too busy.

Choose someone else, Lord.

Not today, maybe tomorrow.

You talkin’ to me?

Or perhaps you might offer a more faithful response that might be music to God’s ears. When Jesus says, *Come and follow me!* you might say these four words: *I will go, Lord!* Amen

1. Samuel Wells, *Incarnational Ministry*, Eerdmans Publishing:2017, p.116 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Fleming Rutledge, *The Undoing of Death*, William B. Eerdmans: 2002, p.334 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)