

## Devotional

The following was delivered by Dr. Victoria Pedrick at a recent meeting of the Reformed Institute's Board of Directors. Dr. Pedrick is Associate Professor in the Department of Classics at Georgetown University. She is a Ruling Elder at Georgetown Presbyterian Church and serves a representative from that church to the Board.

### **Patient Trust & Context – Today's Scripture is Isaiah 49:1b-6**

The Lord called me from the womb,  
from the body of my mother he named my name.  
2 He made my mouth like a sharp sword;  
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;  
he made me a polished arrow;  
in his quiver he hid me away.  
3 And he said to me, "You are my servant,  
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."  
4 But I said, "I have labored in vain;  
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;  
yet surely my right is with the Lord,  
and my recompense with my God."  
5 And now the Lord says,  
he who formed me from the womb to be his servant,  
to bring Jacob back to him;  
and that Israel might be gathered to him—  
for I am honored in the eyes of the Lord,  
and my God has become my strength—  
6 he says:  
"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant  
to raise up the tribes of Jacob  
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;  
I will make you as a light for the nations,  
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

God's promise to Isaiah is magnificent, but there is something poignant about the prophet's voice here, full of potential and of frustration, his talents for poetry and vision well trained but seemingly left unused, as God says, 'I will use you but not now.' The Bible is full of voices like Isaiah's: people who *thought* they had a purpose and were part of God's plan—sharpened and polished—but still left in God's quiver. Let's face it: from Elijah, who cowers in a cave at the threats of Jezebel, to Sarah, who was so over God's promise that she would be the mother to nations that she laughed the last time she heard *that* vow, God's people can get discouraged at God's timing. Here's one of my favorite examples, and so apt for this season of Pentecost: imagine the disciples, who joyously follow the risen Jesus out of the city to Mount Olivet and ask him expectantly—'so is it now, Lord, that you'll restore your kingdom?' And he says, 'not my call or yours—just wait for the Holy Spirit.' And then he ascends while the disciples stare in

disbelief. Finally, two angels show up to say, ‘Stop looking up there—he’ll be back!’ And there’s nothing for the disciples to do but go home and wait.

We have the benefit of hindsight with all of these stories; we know that Sarah is about to become pregnant and that God is sending the Holy Spirit. So we tend to understand these stories as evidence of God’s unfailing love and covenant, with added lessons about human frailty that can lead to impatience and lack of trust in his promises. Yet how often in our own lives do we find ourselves cowering like Elijah, scoffing like Sarah, when we are being faithful and are ready to serve, but God doesn’t seem to be doing anything with our lives? How often do we yearn for our mission but feel clueless and somehow abandoned like the disciples? It’s funny how we can know and savor the lessons from Sarah and the disciples about trust but we find it so hard to claim such assurance for ourselves. I’m not talking about other moments of feeling disconnected from God during suffering or doubt, but about those moments when we’re pretty certain we’re on the right track, we know God’s plan, we’re working hard ... but nothing seems to be happening.

Such was the case in the summer of 1915 for a young French Jesuit priest, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who found himself serving as a stretcher-bearer in the trenches during World War I’s most terrible battles. Ordained in 1911, Teilhard had already begun his brilliant and highly controversial career as a paleontologist, but in 1913 he was sent by his order to England to continue his studies in theology. And then the war interrupted even that. Teilhard would survive the war and go on to write passionately about how Catholics should understand who Christ is in light of evolutionary science. He would also go on to have his work denounced and his voice silenced by the Catholic hierarchy for these dangerous ideas. In fact, when he died in 1955, he was still under that ‘gag order;’ it wasn’t until the 1960’s that Catholic bishops began to acknowledge the moving power of Teilhard’s meditations on Christ in the world.

But in 1915, all this success—and controversy—lay in a future that seemed doubtful for Teilhard, surrounded by terrible suffering and danger. In the midst of this labor, he maintained a correspondence with his cousin Marguerite. Here is one bit that he wrote in October, 1915, that captures something of his discouragement:

What is going to emerge from this ghastly struggle? It's more and more the crisis, the desperately slow evolution of a rebirth of Europe. Yet could things move any more quickly? ... We must offer our existence to God, who neither wastes nor spoils, but rather makes use, better than we could ever anticipate, of the struggles in which we are enveloped. If I said I didn't feel any weariness, I wouldn't be speaking the truth. As soon as the trenches lose the attraction of novelty, you easily become heartily sick of them – particularly, perhaps, when, like me, the work you've given yourself to involves witnessing all the miseries, one after another, without sharing in the battle or victory. Pray to God that he may give me the strength to hold out as long as he should wish me to.

And on July 4, 1915, Teilhard wrote the following meditation to Marguerite, with which I’d like to close because it expresses beautifully, I think, how the faithful try to accept

God's timing. You may be familiar with this passage; it's often called a poem or a prayer, but it's really neither. It was written as more of a fragment of hope, offered from one struggling believer to another.

Above all, trust in the slow work of God. We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay. We should like to skip the intermediate stages. We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new. And yet it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability—and that it may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you; your ideas mature gradually—let them grow, let them shape themselves, without undue haste. Don't try to force them on, as though you could be today what time (that is to say, grace and circumstances acting on your own good will) will make of you tomorrow.

Only God could say what this new spirit gradually forming within you will be. Give Our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading you, and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.

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