Isaiah 49:1-6

That passage we read just now from Isaiah – it was the prophet’s testimony about his vocation. I believe the things this prophet said are also things for Virginia to say.

First, he said, God called him before he was born, and I believe the same is true of you, Virginia. It’s taken you thirty years to get here, and you may be a bit surprised that this is where you are, but I don’t think God is surprised. He called you and named you before you were born. It’s not that he predetermined that you would be in this place on this day, in the sense that you had no option. He did call you and name you, but you could have said “No.” There was at least one person whom Jesus called who said “No” and went away. The fact that God called you doesn’t mean you had no choice whether or not to become God’s servant. It does mean you can hold precious the awareness that God’s call and naming goes back to the earliest beginning of your life.

That fact also implies that God has been involved in all the years of your life from when he called you, up until this moment. Those years have had their tough times, as is true for all of us. Again, I wouldn’t say that God predetermined those tough experiences. What I would say is that God has made them part of the tapestry that is your life, that is who you are, that is the person God has called and whose call we today formally acknowledge. It has made you the person God has already been using in ministry and whom God will continue to use.

That links with the second thing the prophet says: “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.” Now when I told Virginia the passage I was thinking of preaching on, she told me she laughed when she read this line. I decided not to ask why she laughed; you can ask her afterwards. In what sense has God make your mouth like a sharp sword? There’s an odd things about being a prophet or a pastor. You have to contradict people. You may be able to agree with them often, too, but if you’re not in the business of contradicting them sometimes, there’s something amiss.

Prophets are often in the business of confronting people who are confident about their position. This prophet has to confront the authorities in Babylon who don’t realize that events are taking a new turn and don’t realize that they are about to lose power there to forces that will allow the exiles from Judah to go home and rebuild their city. The prophet also has to confront the exiles themselves, who also can’t believe that this is what their God is bringing about. The prophet has a ministry of comfort to them, but paradoxically they don’t want his ministry of comfort, thank you very much.

It’s very obvious that a chaplain, like the pastor of a church, has a ministry of comfort. The talk of being given a mouth like sharp sword reminds you, Virginia, and reminds us that a ministry of comfort can be unwelcome because it’s hard to believe. It also constitutes a reminder that a chaplain or a pastor sometimes has to stand up to authorities and to do so on behalf of people who can’t stand up for themselves.

So the prophet has been called, and has been prepared. He is then addressed and given his task. The third thing he tells us, then, is that God said to him, “You are my servant. You are Israel in whom I will be glorified.” Now in our culture people like to talk being God’s partners in his work in the world. That’s an expression that hardly occurs in the Bible. It’s like talk about furthering the kingdom. The Bible doesn’t talk in those terms. We are not God’s partners. The Bible’s picture is of God being our father and us being his children, or God being our teacher and us being his pupils, or God being our master and us being his servants. He is the boss. We can knock on his door and talk to him, but he is the boss. We are not his co-workers. “You are my servant,” God said to this prophet. The term may sound like a put-down, sound limiting, but that’s not how it strikes the servants of God in the Bible. They are thrilled to be the servants of such a great master. Imagine that the President asks you to be on his White House staff. What a privilege for a pastor to serve a master such as Jesus!

But the master adds something else, something extraordinary. “You are my servant,” he says; and then he adds, “you are Israel in whom I will be glorified.” His point is this. Israel as a whole had been called to be God’s servant in whom God would be glorified, but it hasn’t worked. They have failed to behave like God’s servant and God hasn’t been glorified in them. So now God says to this prophet, “Okay, here is my plan B.” Actually it’s plan D, but that’s another story. “Given that Israel hasn’t been very good as a servant, I want you to be my servant, I want you to be the embodiment of what Israel was supposed to be.”

It’s easy for us to be discouraged by the state of the church. If we are discouraged, what God then does is say to us, “Okay, you embody what it is supposed to mean to be the church of God. That’s what being my servant means.” God says that to you, Virginia.

Fourth, this prophet lived with discouragement and a challenge to maintain hope. He had said, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.” He had tried to be God’s servant, he’d tried to embody what it meant to be Israel. He had preached to his people but they had taken no notice; they didn’t believe his good news. He had told the authorities and his people’s neighbors about what was coming, and they hadn’t believed him either. And he had been tempted to think that his whole ministry was pointless. Maybe most pastors have reason to think so from time to time in their ministry. But somehow he had not lost faith or lost hope. He had hung on. “Yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God,” he has said. In the moments of discouragement, when the ministry seems pointless, Virginia, your vocation is to hang on, to keep faith and hope.

Fifth, this prophet lived with a vocation that turned out to be bigger than he or anyone could have dreamed. His account of it is almost funny, or is unintentionally funny. “Okay,” says God, “you’re tempted to be discouraged by the task I gave you. All right then, I’ll give you a much bigger one. I gave you a ministry that was designed to bring Israel back to me, and that hasn’t worked. So instead I’ll give you a ministry to the whole world.” And you know, in a real sense that has worked. What are we doing today but receiving the ministry of this prophet, we as representatives of many of the nations of the world. It’s the pattern that’s repeated in the New Testament, when Jesus fails to win a response from his own people and God therefore sends his disciples off to tell the world about him. Virginia, we don’t know what God may want to do through you over the coming decades, but don’t be surprised if it’s something much bigger than we can dream of today.

God called you before you were born. God made your mouth a sharp sword. God summoned you to be his servant and to be an embodiment of what the entire people of God is called to be. God promised that there was reason to keep faith and keep hope. God has a vocation for you that may be bigger than anything we can imagine today.

In the name of the Father and thw Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.