

For as long as I can remember, my mom has adored one tiny, little Disney character more than any other, to the point that when we were there a couple of years ago, we all actually got a picture with him so my mom could meet him. He is not well known, unless you are a Disney person, and if you are one, he might not be your favorite character, in fact you might, like some, find him annoying, but my mom...well, my mom adores a little, purple dragon named Figment.

Figment is the heart of Journey into Imagination, a tour through a laboratory dedicated to studying the senses. It's supposed to be this very serious lab, with scientists and protocols, and yet Figment keeps popping up and turning things upside down, sometimes quite literally, because to him imagination is just as important when it comes to our senses and our perception of the world. Sure chocolate smells good, but when your imagination turns it into a river of chocolate a la Willy Wonka, that's more powerful. Imagination helps us figure out what we're holding if we can only feel it but not see it. For Figment, all it takes is one little...spark. He sings a whole song about it, and if you ride the ride, it will be stuck in your head the rest of the day, "One little spark of inspiration is the heart of all creation. Right at the start, of everything that's new, one little spark, lights up for you." All it takes for your imagination to take flight is one tiny little spark

of inspiration and then your brain is off and rolling to see what it can do with that tiny little speck. To Figment, the key is that one, tiny, little thing can give rise to something massive. You just have to embrace the spark.

It is within the words of the prophet that we find a hint towards this kind of spark. The words of Isaiah come to us today describing a servant of the Lord. Throughout Isaiah there are four different songs about this servant, but never once is said servant identified, leaving it open-ended for the reader to poke and prod and ask, who could this be? To Isaiah's original audience, they wondered if it was *them*, the whole people of Israel, called to be God's servants. Or maybe it was a leader who would rise up for them, the next David or maybe even Cyrus, for a Persian could be a servant. To those living in Jesus' time and for us sitting here with 2,000 plus years of Christian interpretation behind us, we hear these words and say, it's Jesus, it has to be, it sounds just like him. And yet, there is also the same question that the Israelites asked that lingers, what if it's us?

The easier interpretation, honestly, is to say that it's a specific person, especially if that person is Jesus, because it lets us off the hook, right? Clearly, it must be Jesus who brings forth justice to the nations, who doesn't cry out in pain, who doesn't break under the weight of the world, who will not dim even the tiniest spark, but will bring justice. Clearly, it must be

Jesus who will be a light to the nations, who will free the prisoners and all those who sit in darkness, who will open the eyes of the blind, and give the breath of the Spirit to God's people. Clearly, this must be Jesus and not us, because let's be real, that's a lot of work, that's a lot of *hard* work, and obviously we don't have the time, capacity, or ability to do all of that, so yes, yes, Jesus is the servant, plain and simple. We're off the hook *and* we have the ability to say, well, come on Jesus, have you seen this place? Where's the justice? Where's the freeing from oppression? Where's the healing? Get on it, can't you see we're struggling down here? Sounds like you need to do your job! You are the servant after all.

Here's the thing though...we're Lutherans and that means we love to live in the grey areas, in the both/ands of it all. We are sinner and saint, simultaneously; all of scripture contains law and gospel; there is grace and accountability. And I think this text drives us to do the same thing, if we're willing to actually do it. Because, yes, for sure, this servant, it sounds like Jesus. It has Jesus written all over it. This is Jesus who stood up in the middle of the synagogue in Nazareth and declared that he was there to proclaim the day of the Lord, to let the prisoners go free, and bring sight to the blind. This is Jesus who overturned tables in the Temple because it was doing grievous economic harm to his people. This is Jesus who went to the

cross branded as an enemy of the state for daring to speak truth to power and point out the hypocrisy, violence, and pain caused by those in command. So yes, this servant Isaiah sings of...this is God's beloved, Jesus of Nazareth, son of Mary and Joseph, who was born in a manger, worked with his hands, knew what it was to be a poor refugee fleeing for his life, and thus knew the very real consequences of proclaiming justice in the world he lived in. This is Jesus of Nazareth who bent beneath the waters of the River Jordan, baptized by his cousin who would also be murdered as an enemy of the state, jailed because he pointed to the sins of their rulers. This is Jesus of Nazareth who was baptized so that he could join his life to the lives of those he came to save, so he could show them a new way, a new path, so he could show them a spark in the darkness, a spark of hope, a spark of justice that refused to be quenched as long as there were people there willing to defend it, to fight for it, to refuse to let it go out.

But while this is Jesus, it is also...us. God's beloved, God's chosen, those who have had the waters of baptism trickle off of our heads in the assurance that we are claimed and *called* to be people of God in the world. It is us who each and every week proclaim the words of the Lord's Prayer where we pray for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. It is us proclaim ardent belief in God made flesh, in Jesus who gave us a new

commandment, who touched the leper, healed the sick, and refused to give into the temptation to take the easy road when the hard road led to justice and salvation. It is us who proclaim that we are to be God's hands and feet in the world, but so often choose to believe that those hands are lame or are simply not ours to wield. It is us who more often than not would let the tiniest spark, the smallest ember burn out because it feels far too difficult to keep it burning.

That spark...that dimly burning wick...that is what calls to us today because it is a spark that is begging to be stoked. It is a spark of hope. And I know...believe me, I know, hope can be hard to find, let alone keep burning these days, but as God's servants that is what we are called to do. To refuse to let the world douse our hope when we know that there is something to hope in, when *we*, our hands, our feet, our faith, our service to God's calling are something that can give the world hope. It is a spark of love that declares that God shows no partiality, but welcomes all people into God's arms and says come here and find your rest, for you are mine. Love that we proclaim shows no distinction based on race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, birthplace, age, ability, or documentation status.

That spark...that dimly burning wick...it is a spark of justice that we as God's servants are called to faithfully bring forth, but not justice as we

would define it. Justice that is defined by violence and law and order, justice defined by *that* person getting theirs, but not that person because they're wealthy or more deserving or privileged. No, we are called to faithfully bring forth justice as seen through God's eyes. Justice that is based in equity, advocating for the most vulnerable, and that goes beyond mere legalities but strives for mercy, generosity, and grace.

Day in and day out far too many innocent people lose their lives because we are so busy pursuing justice based on our own definitions, and when we let that happen, when we refuse to stand up, to speak out, to do something, we quench that spark, we snuff out that wick that is barely still flickering. But when love our neighbors, speak up for the most vulnerable, refuse to turn a blind eye to inequity and violence, when we are bold enough to declare that violence is a sin, when we advocate for peace, when we stand up for those who are oppressed, chained up, and locked away that is when justice begins to roll down like a mighty flood. That is when that wick begins to burn a little brighter. That is when a spark becomes a flame.

This world, the fate of our neighbor, whatever comes next, we can't just shrug our shoulders and say, oh that's God's job, only Jesus can fix that so we'll leave it up to him, whenever he feels like showing up. The thing is, Jesus shows up all the time. Jesus shows up in our hands, our feet. Jesus

shows up in the eyes of the vulnerable, in the names of slaughtered, in the voices of those crying out for help. Jesus is everywhere. The servant is everywhere, but nothing is going to just miraculously solve itself. Justice doesn't just happen because we think it should. It takes work. A fire doesn't keep burning ad nauseam, it takes stoking, tending, care. A spark dies quickly if it is ignored. It is the call of God's servant to be in the business of stoking the fires of justice, equity, and peace for all of God's people. The time for passing the buck and saying that's someone else's fire to tend to is over. The embers lie before us, our neighbors cry out around us, will we turn away, let the spark go out, or will we dare to serve, to stoke the ember until all see it burning bright for God's justice, God's kingdom come for all? **AMEN!!!**