

(Bruised Reeds and Smoldering Wicks) Bent Nails and Burned-out Light Bulbs preached at Makiki, Jan. 9, 2005

A Sermon by Pastor Brad Smith

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The Sermon in a Sentence: The Kingdom of God is made up of bent nails and burned-out light bulbs (bruised reeds and smoldering wicks).

Why I am Preaching It: So that the hearers (and the preacher!) will be open to God's perspective of weakness in themselves and in others.

Sermon begins here:

We're doing something new for the next few months. The sermons will not be based on only one passage, but on a passage from the Gospels about Jesus, and an Old Testament passage that helps us to understand Jesus a little better. This morning we'll see Jesus as God's Servant. Most of the message will focus on the verses from Isaiah that we did as a responsive reading.

I originally entitled this sermon, "Bruised Reeds and Smoldering Wicks." After the worship bulletin was already printed, I realized that it wasn't a good title. Most of us don't have any experience with using reeds as building materials or wicks for lighting. We use things like nails when we build, and light bulbs to provide light. I should have called the sermon, "Bent Nails and Burned-out Light Bulbs." It's about things that aren't much use—or actually, about people that aren't much use. And I think that we'll be pretty surprised when we look at what the Bible has to say about useless people.

But before we look at what God has to say about the bent nails and burned out light bulbs of this world, let's look at how these verses fit into the bigger picture that Isaiah is interested in.

Remember that none of the biblical writers, including Isaiah, put in chapters and verses. They just wrote straight on through. The divisions were put in much later, to help us look things up more easily.

So we might jump in at Chapter 42 and think that Isaiah has been writing all along about God's Servant. In fact, he's been doing just the opposite: he's been writing about idols! He's comparing false gods with the true Servant of God. [Read 41:21-24]. False gods are useless, he's been saying. Can't you tell?! Don't you know where they will get you?! You fools! You've been

wasting all your energy looking at idols. Well, now look at my Servant! See what he is about! Marvel at his power! That will get you somewhere!

Now we might not have little statues around the house, but Isaiah's message to us would be the same. An idol doesn't have to be made of wood or stone. It can be whatever fills our time or our thought life, whatever we dream and fantasize about. So Isaiah might have written to us, "Can't you see that self-fulfillment, career advancement, financial security, and all those toys you think you can't live without are here today and gone tomorrow?! Come on, you people! Look at Jesus! That's where the power is! That's where security lies! That's where you'll find true fulfillment! He's your model for success!

And then, in God's name, Isaiah starts piling up more and more descriptions of this wonderful Servant and what he is going to do: He is chosen by God; God, the all powerful one, delights in him. Talk about connections in high places! The Spirit, the power, the energy of God are in him. He will give sight to the blind, and set prisoners free.

The Bible uses blindness and captivity both figuratively and literally. This servant has power to free people from their spiritual blindness and from lies that hold them captive. He also has power to bring physical healing, and to transform the worst criminals into the kind of people who will never return to prison once their sentence is served. Three times in this short passage it says he will bring justice. Justice is much more than a legal term for Isaiah. He means that this servant will form a kind of society where the whole teaching of God is loved and followed.

Can you imagine a society where God's teaching was the norm? Where you could leave your doors open at night because theft and violence were unknown? Where churches were packed not only on Sundays but during the week as people met to pray for each other and for the world? Where marriage vows didn't need to include "till death do us part" because everybody assumed that marriage was a lifetime commitment? Where prosperity was the norm, and the only reason that people got hungry was because they had decided to go on a fast in gratitude to God? What would Makiki look like, what would our families be like, what would I be like, if, no matter what happened, our first thought was to follow God? Think for a minute how your life would be different. [Give the people a moment to think.]

Now how in the world is God's Servant going to do all that? What will his strategy be for transforming society?

It's when we look at the Servant's method that the huge surprise comes in. [Read 42:2-3a]. This powerful one chosen by God and filled with his Spirit, this light of the world is going to accomplish his mission by paying attention to bruised reeds and smoldering wicks. Both reeds and wicks were very common items, easily replaced—much like nails and light bulbs today. A bruised reed has been damaged somehow. Maybe it was weak from some genetic problem, or had been eaten by bugs, or maybe it was hit by a falling tree branch. It would no longer be useful as building material such as thatch for a roof. The natural thing to do would be to break it off and to throw it out, or maybe burn it as fuel. It was much faster simply to use another reed than to painstakingly strengthen a bruised one, just like it is much faster to grab a new nail than to pound out a bent one.

At night people lighted their homes with oil lamps. If the wick was smoldering, it indicated that the fuel was almost used up. The normal thing to do was to snuff it out and go to sleep.

Of course this Servant is not concerned about literal reeds and wicks, but about people. Now why would Jesus, this powerful servant of God care about weak, sinful, unpromising people? Let's turn to Matthew for our answer.

Isaiah didn't use the name of Jesus, but when we look at the Matthew passage, we see the Servant from Isaiah all over again. [Read Matthew 3:13-17.] Do you see how Jesus fulfills the prophecy? The Servant is called in righteousness, and Jesus fulfills righteousness. God puts his Spirit on the Servant, and the Spirit descends on Jesus. God is delighted with the Servant, and God is well pleased with his Son, Jesus.

And I think there is one more way that Jesus fulfills Isaiah's prophecy. The Servant cares for the bruised reeds and smoldering wicks of the world. Jesus takes it even further. In accepting John's baptism for the forgiveness of sins, the powerful, sinless Jesus identifies himself completely with all of the world's bruised reeds and smoldering wicks.

There's the shocker. John was stunned by Jesus' self-identification with the world's weak and sinful people, and we should be, too.

Why should we be so amazed? Because we know the servant's mission was to transform the world, and everybody knows that you do not change the world by wasting your time with weak, broken people. Hitler had a dream of a powerful Germany that would rule the world for a thousand years. We all know about the slaughter of the Jews, but did you know that Hitler also killed off the mentally retarded, the handicapped, and epileptics? There would be no bruised reeds or smoldering wicks in the Third Reich.

Much of our economy operates on a similar principle. On our recent visit to California, one of our sons was deeply upset. His coworker was beginning to have back trouble. She was suddenly fired on what he believed to be a trumped-up charge. It was more efficient for the company to fire her immediately than to deal with workmen's compensation later on. He was troubled to see how employees were seen as disposable and easily replaceable. The world would say, "Hey, stop being naïve. That's how life works, and the sooner you start choosing the winners, the better off you'll be."

Even as Christians we fall into the same temptation of looking to the strong. I will always be grateful for the college ministry that led me to Christ and nurtured my faith in those first years. But I know that they advertised themselves as a ministry that would influence the world by reaching future leaders—the educated. Another college ministry went even further—they decided to focus their resources on the Ivy League and other prestigious universities, where they felt their impact on society would be the greatest. You could say that they were seeking to build the kingdom with strong reeds, and to light the world with bright, shining wicks.

But I can't point the finger at them without accusing myself as well. I remember a man that I used to run into at social events from time to time. I suppose he was mildly mentally ill. At any rate, he would approach whomever he knew and start talking nonstop, usually about himself, in a monotone. I'd be lying to you if I said that I never looked for ways to keep away from that bruised reed, from that smoldering wick. I wanted to spend my time with more promising people. Kind of silly, since I have a few bruises of my own, and often enough I smolder rather than burn brightly as well. So do you.

That, by the way, answers the question of why Jesus, God's Son and perfect Servant, cares so much for bruised and smoldering people. That's the only kind of people there are. I am bruised and smoldering, and so are you.

We may appear competent, but we know inwardly that in one way or another, we are not. What are we to do? Well, for one thing, this passage gives us permission to be bruised and smoldering without being ashamed or feeling guilty about it.

As a pastor, one thing I do is to visit the elderly and others who may need to be cared for at home. I find that many people feel so terrible that now they need somebody to help them. Even people who were glad to care for their own small children or elderly parents somehow feel that they themselves should never become what they call a "burden" to anybody else. This overwhelming desire for independence, not to be seen as bruised, can have very damaging effects.

You may know that Oregon is the only state so far that has an assisted suicide law for gravely ill people. People who feel that life is no longer worth living can request a fatal dose of medication from their physician. I had always assumed that most people who committed suicide in this way were in terrible physical pain. I was surprised when I read that pain was not the leading cause of suicide under this law; the leading cause was either the loss of independence, or the fear of losing independence. How tragic to believe that it's better to be dead than to be in need of help.

Or it may be the caregiver who dares not admit that he or she is smoldering, that the oil of hope and emotional energy and even physical strength is almost gone. Oh, if only we could freely acknowledge to each other that we are bruised reeds and smoldering wicks, that we all need help not only from Jesus but also from one another to stand straighter, to burn more brightly.

When we lived in Venezuela I slipped and fell on the subway steps. Eventually I needed to have a bone chip removed surgically. In that part of the world, extended family members usually stay with hospitalized patients to attend to their needs. My students in the seminary knew that I had no extended family close at hand, and that Becky needed to be at home to care for our children.

The students were so eager to stay at the hospital and to be my extended family. Why? I think because a student-professor relationship implies a certain distance. I was the knowledgeable one, pouring oil into their lamps. But with my hospitalization, I became the bruised reed, and they were able to attend to me. They were no longer just my students, but my Christian brothers and sisters, able to care for me in my time of need.

I think it shows God's sense of humor that he had me preach this sermon as I am just finishing up with laryngitis. I think of the number of people who helped me so that my bruised vocal cords could speak today: my doctor, who is from this congregation, saw me on short notice; Becky and the office staff took and made phone call for me this past week; quite a number of you prayed for me; and two people offered to read my sermon manuscript to the congregation in case my voice did not come back in time.

Our strengths will never be building blocks for friendship and community. When I am strong I don't need you. To build Christian community you need bruised reeds who are learning to depend upon one another more than you need straight, independent ones.

Did you know that Jesus Himself had no problem seeking help from others? The Bible talks about a group of women who helped support him financially. At the worst moment of his life, in the Garden of Gethsemane, he asked his three closest friends to be with him when he struggled to accept the Cross. What do you suppose it did for those women, what do you suppose it did for his disciples that they were able to meet him in his need? If our Lord and Savior was a bruised reed and a smoldering wick, why are we ashamed to admit that we are, too?

So Part One of the good news of Isaiah is this: Being bruised and smoldering is nothing to be ashamed of. In fact, it brings us great dignity, because our Lord Himself chose to become like that. Here is Part Two of this good news: Everybody else, including our fellow church members, is smoldering and bruised as well. If Jesus considers them worthy of his love, then we had better do the same. Always, always remember that Jesus is our model as well as our Savior.

Have you ever noticed how bothersome a smoky fire can be? Every year at Family Camp we have a campfire, and naturally people scramble to get away when the smoke blows in their faces. You're going to find some

smoldering wicks pretty irritating as well, especially the ones that are battling with the same personality defects that you have. You may need to confront them, as others may also need to confront you. In some instances, the best way to show love and respect is to call people to account for their actions. But never, never write them off as unworthy of your care and respect, just as Jesus will never, never write you off as unworthy of his care and respect.

Let me finish up with a quotation from a wonderful little essay called “A Bruised Reed.” It was written by Richard Sibbes, who lived in England about four hundred years ago. “The Holy Spirit is content to dwell in smoky, offensive souls. Oh that the Spirit would breathe into our spirits the same merciful disposition! The Church is a common hospital, where all are in some measure sick of some spiritual disease.”

So, there it is, my fellow bruised and smoky brothers and sisters. You are not all you could be, and neither am I. You can't make it on your own, and neither can I. Listen again to the wonderful promise: “A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.”

Let us pray.