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## **Where Ministry Begins**

Matthew 3:13

The book of Isaiah introduces us to an unusual type of leader who emerges at the very worst time in Judah's history. The nation has been dismembered by a foreign power. The people face the daunting challenges of financial collapse, occupation by a foreign army, and the exile of a major segment of the population. The leader that Isaiah points to will not be a king in the conventional sense. This leader is called the servant of the Lord. The servant lives by a different paradigm of leadership which is rooted in ministering to the needs of the people.

But the most important characteristic of the servant of the Lord is his refusal to be controlled by the bad news that is unfolding all around. The servant refuses to exist in the prison of brokenness which holds his people in its grip. The servant rejects the old humanity which remembers old wrongs and tries to even the score. The servant creates a new humanity which leaves greed and power behind to embrace God's love and justice. And that means offering a ministry of compassion even to the exploiters of his people. The calling of the servant is to lead the people out of the chaos and pain of their existence and to transform their relationship with their enemies.

The desperate circumstances which the servant of the Lord addresses in Isaiah can be seen in the plight of Christian communities in the Middle East today. Followers of Christ have become a high priority target of al-Qaida. On October 31, sixty-eight worshipers died during a bloody siege on a Baghdad church. On New Year's Eve twenty-one people were killed when a bomb went off at a Coptic Christian church in Alexandria, Egypt. In response to the Baghdad attack Christmas was canceled in cities across Iraq. Christian leaders called on their communities to bypass decorations, special services, and appearances by Santa Claus. The archbishop of the Chaldean Church in Iraq summarized the situation in these words:

Nobody can ignore the threats of al-Qaida against Iraqi Christians... We cannot find a single source of joy that makes us celebrate. The situation of the Christians is bleak (Yahya Barzanji and Someer N. Yacoub, Associated Press, December 23, 2010).

Other Christian leaders declared that the decision not to celebrate was about more than the desire to avoid future attacks. It was also a way of expressing the enormity of the grief and sadness Christians feel. They are living on the front lines of the kind of world that al-Qaida is trying to create; a world based on fear, division, and hate.

Our nation experienced a taste of this kind of sadness when a gunman opened fire on a political gathering in Arizona yesterday. Reporting on the deaths and injuries the Sheriff of the county where the attack took place stated that he does not know of any public office holders who do not receive death threats. How sad it is when our public life is driven by the politics of hate.

The book of Isaiah was written to a people who were living with this predicament. The ministry of the servant confronts us with an important truth about our struggle against the peddlers of fear and hate. This struggle can never be won if we place all our trust in our military and law enforcement capabilities. We must know who we are and what kind of world we are trying to create. This is a

spiritual struggle that runs through the heart of each and every one of us. It is in our hearts that the battle between good and evil is fought. The servant in Isaiah challenges us to reject the destructive elements of our old humanity to embrace the way of compassion, justice, and peace.

This spiritual contrast is at the heart of Jesus' ministry as it is reported in the gospels. Matthew tells us that before Jesus began his ministry he presented himself to John to be baptized in the Jordan River. Jesus' willingness to receive baptism is a sign of his obedience to God and his acceptance of the ministry to which he is called. When Jesus goes into those waters he is also entering the chaos and sadness of human pain and brokenness. This is the first step of a ministry which creates a new humanity where we are no longer controlled by fear, greed, and hatred.

Jesus' baptism shows that he has come to fulfill the mission of Isaiah's servant of the Lord. Our baptism confirms that we are part of that ministry.