We desperately need good leadership. We desperately need faithful leadership. Today, as much as any other time in recent memory, we turn to Isaiah for a vision of leadership that will bring healing and justice to our nation and our world.

Isaiah communicates God’s vision of leadership in a beautiful, powerful poem. The verses we read today are just one portion of a cycle of poems about the work of the servant: Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. As with many poems, the exact meaning of the words is not immediately clear. It sounds as if God has chosen one person to serve as a leader. But if we read the verses before and after this portion we understand God is lifting up a group of people to serve as leaders. The entire nation of Israel is called to be leaders. The nation will bring God’s justice for all people, everywhere. God’s faithful leaders will come from within a community, but their leadership will extend outward to the nations.

Let’s consider other key attributes of leadership expressed in this part of Isaiah 42. First, notice there is a desperate need for leadership. Isaiah says, the coastlands wait for his teaching. The people along the coast and other nations are searching, waiting to hear words that will bring them strength and vision. Faithful leaders speak into situations of emptiness and chaos.

In order to understand the second attribute of leadership, consider the setting for this part of the book of Isaiah. Chapters 40-55 were proclaimed to the people of Israel as they were in exile in Babylon. God is calling the people of Israel to serve as leaders, to be a light to other nations, even as they are held in captivity in Babylon. This is the central irony of leadership in our faith tradition: those who are chosen as leaders often come from a place of weakness and powerlessness.

Third, notice that the work of faithful leaders does not conform to human traditions and human expectations. In his paraphrase of this passage, Eugene Peterson describes the unusual style of the servant leader in stark terms: My servant won’t call attention to what he does with loud speeches or gaudy parades. He won’t brush aside the bruised and the hurt, and he won’t disregard the small and insignificant. Faithful leaders are not proud. Faithful leaders do not draw attention to themselves. Faithful leaders pay attention to those who are powerless. Faithful leaders are servants.

Fourth, notice that while many human leaders are most concerned with establishing and increasing their own power, God’s faithful leaders are concerned with the work of justice. The servants will faithfully bring forth justice. They will open the eyes that are blind and bring the prisoners from the dungeon. They will bring light to those who sit in darkness.

Faithful leaders are treated with skepticism by many, because they do not conform to human traditions and are fully concerned with doing the work of justice, rather than with consolidating their own power. The work of God’s leaders is also unexpected because it takes new, creative forms. Isaiah says, See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare. The work of faithful leadership is a new creation. In some way it is unlike what has been seen before.

The final quality of servant leadership is the most difficult for us to see, because our vision is limited. But Isaiah speaks from a truth far greater than a single century or a single place or a single nation and says, My servant will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth. The work of God’s servants cannot fail because it is founded in God’s work, it is framed by the moral laws of the universe.

Some of the greatest examples of faithful leadership in recent time were given by Martin Luther King, Jr. and those who worked alongside him in the struggle for civil rights. The seven attributes of faithful leadership described in Isaiah 42 are clearly seen in the leadership of Dr. King and those who worked with him.

As was the case in ancient Israel, Dr. King entered into his work in a time of chaos and emptiness. There was a desperate need for leadership and vision.

As with the nation of Israel, Dr. King and his partners came from within a single community, but their leadership extended outward to ‘the nations’. In Dr. King’s case, all of the original leaders came from within the black community. Dr. King understood the struggle for civil rights was not just on behalf of the black
community. The work of civil rights brought a better day for all Americans. The example of nonviolent resistance given by the black community was a light to all nations.

Thinking back to our passage from Isaiah, the central irony of Isaiah’s prophecy is that God is calling a group of prisoners, kept in exile away from their homeland, to be the leaders of a movement for freedom and justice. The same was true for Dr. King and the other leaders of the civil rights movement. They led out of a position of relative weakness.

In order to be faithful leaders, Dr. King and his partners had to break new ground. They could not continue with what had been tried before. Their new creation was the use of active nonviolent resistance to change the hearts and minds and laws of Americans.

While we honor one person, Martin Luther King. But Dr. King understood very well that faithful leadership is always shared. Dr. King had many partners in his work. My favorite example was Mother Pollard. Mother Pollard was an older woman who participated in the Montgomery bus boycott.

If you aren’t familiar with the story of the Montgomery bus boycott, here are a couple of things to know. The Montgomery bus boycott was one of the first large scale efforts to desegregate public places or services in America. It lasted over a year, from December, 1955-December, 1956. During the boycott segregationists used firebombs to destroy part or all of six black churches and the homes of three leaders, including Dr. King’s. Dr. King and other leaders were fined and spent many days in jail for their work leading the boycott.

Dr. King described Mother Pollard’s leadership in a sermon with these words: One of the most dedicated participants in the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, was an elderly Negro whom we affectionately called Mother Pollard. On a particular Monday evening, following a tension-packed week which included being arrested and receiving numerous threatening telephone calls, I spoke at a mass meeting. I attempted to convey an overt impression of strength and courage, although I was inwardly depressed and fear-stricken. At the end of the meeting, Mother Pollard came to the front of the church and said, “Come here son.” I immediately went to her and hugged her affectionately. “Something is wrong with you” she said. “You didn’t talk strong tonight.” Seeking to further disguise my fears, I retorted, “Oh, no, Mother Pollard, nothing is wrong. I am feeling as fine as ever.” But her insight was discerning. “Now you can’t fool me,” she said. “I knows something is wrong. Is it that we ain’t doing things to please you? Or is it that the white folks is bothering you?” Before I could respond, she looked directly into my eyes and said, “I don told you we is with you all the way.” Then her face became radiant and she said in words of quiet certainty, “But even if we ain’t with you, God’s gonna take care of you.”

Mother Pollard’s words point to the final quality of leadership described by Isaiah: it cannot fail. Dr. King’s work to expand civil rights for all Americans could not fail, ultimately because it was part of God’s work. 52 years ago Dr. King’s life was ended by a hateful, fearful man. But his leadership could not be defeated. His leadership lives on in the leadership of millions of people all around the world today.

There is an urgent need for us to follow Isaiah’s vision of leadership today, just as there was an urgent need in Dr. King’s time. Just as it was for Isaiah’s people and for Dr. King’s people, we enter into the work of leadership in a time of chaos. There is a relative void of faithful leadership. Sometimes we find ourselves in a situation where we look over our shoulders and ask, “Isn’t anyone going to respond to the need or the injustice we see?” We enter into the work of leadership in a time of great need.

The other characteristics of Dr. King’s leadership apply to us as well. One leader will never be enough. We need each person here to be a leader in the work. We need to be a community of leaders. Our leadership must be concerned with the work of justice. As it was for Dr. King, we should expect that some people will be surprised by what we the work we are doing and may even oppose us because it does not conform to what they expect. As was true for the leaders of the civil rights movement, faithful leadership in our time will emerge out of a place of relative weakness; we must be relying on God’s power, not ours, in order to fulfill our mission.

If we are being faithful, our leadership will be directed outward, seeking to share the resources, energy and leadership we have with our entire community, the nation and the world. Faithful leadership in our time will involve some sort of new creation. The strategies and plans of former generations will not suffice. Just as God is creative, we must be creative if we are going to be leaders in God’s work.

All of these ideas about faithful leadership might seem overwhelming to us. The task would be impossible if we were embarking on an agenda and a mission that belonged to us alone. But the mission does not belong to us. Just as was true for Dr. King, the mission belongs to God. If our leadership is concerned with God’s work, we cannot fail.