

Called – Isaiah 49:1-7

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Early this past week, John Sharp walked into my office and he said, “You picked a doozy of a text to preach on this week.” John uses the texts I pick out for worship as the basis for the discussion he leads in the Soul Café each week. So, he knew that this text from Isaiah 49 was on the schedule. And it’s a hard one to get one’s head around.

I hadn’t yet looked at it again since selecting it several weeks ago. And he asked me if I had any sort of direction on where I was heading with it. And I said, “I sure don’t.” But in my defense, I did remind him that it was only Tuesday.

Well, I got to Thursday afternoon, and I was left asking myself why I had picked this text. Because, it’s a confusing one.

Even Margaret O’Dell, who’s a retired professor of religion at St. Olaf College said in her commentary, “These verses are admittedly difficult. Scholars frequently comment on the problem in verse 5, in which the Servant, who was identified in verse 3 as Israel, is now called to “bring back” Jacob and “gather” Israel to God. The verse thus raises the question, ‘How can Israel be called to deliver Israel?’”

So, it indeed is a tough text. Yet, despite confusion over names and titles and relationship, there is a servant spoken of here—whether it be an individual or a community. And this servant is told by God, in verse 6, “I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

And later, the last words of this passage, “Because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”

The servant has been chosen to be a light to the nations, that God’s salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

We can work with that. Whether the servant described here is a community or an individual, the call to be a light to the nations registers with us.

Being this light can come and does come often amid turbulent times. We only have to look at the recent unrest in the city of Minneapolis to realize that the immigration issues that that city, and really the whole country, are facing are big, complex, and are fraught with huge consequences.

I had someone this week express her frustration and grief over that Minneapolis situation and acknowledged the futility she felt in not being able to do anything about it. She questioned how her faith and the limited gifts she brings could have any impact whatsoever on situations that big in scope.

Fair. That’s a fair assessment. We do feel powerless in those moments that require huge impacts to make things better.

Our light really does feel like only a small flicker in the big scheme of things.

But we each do have at least a flicker of the light of Christ within us that can shine and be seen by others, a light that can shine in blessedness upon the life of another or even a community.

The four people we are ordaining and installing today as elders have unique gifts God has given them for many purposes. And one of those purposes is for leadership in our church over the next three years. Dawn, Margo, Brett, and Joanie are so

devoted to our mission here. Their light, which they may not consider more than a flicker, will be an invaluable light in our ministry. Their gifts of intelligence, compassion, organization, and leadership will help us as a congregation to be a light to the nations.

As people of faith, it is in the church community where these gifts of ours most resonate. Many of us have called church home for most of our lives. And in this or any other church family, we find our place—a place to be welcomed and included, a place to grow in our faith by asking questions, a place to find friendship and companionship, a place to use these gifts of God, a place to find care, and a place to find grace.

Craig Barnes, a Presbyterian pastor and former president of Princeton Seminary, reflected on the significance of the church in one of his writings. He said this:

“I sat in the side balcony of our local church for the World Communion Sunday service. This is where I worship with my wife when I am not on the road serving the seminary. We chose the balcony when our sons were teenagers, as part of a deal we made in order to get them to worship. But after they went to college, Dawne and I continued to head up to the balcony.

“It offers a great view of the congregation. During the distribution of the communion elements, I found myself focused not on prayer, as I should have been, but on those in the pews below. I don’t know them as well as I would if I were their pastor. But over the years of sitting in that balcony, I’ve come to recognize many of their faces.

“Most of those in the pews probably had a week that was neither great nor horrible, but they’ve learned that nothing can make us more blind to the presence of the Holy Spirit than the

ordinary. These worshipers don't feel broken or particularly blessed, but they find their lives centered in saying an old creed, singing a hymn so familiar they barely need the hymnal, reciting the Lord's Prayer, and hearing a sermon that treats God's Word and human words seriously. They just want to know that grace can also appear in the routine.

"They gave up a precious Sunday morning and came to church because they needed to sit beside people they may not know any better than I do in a house of worship, which is already a sacramental experience. Their souls beckoned or maybe dragged them to church that morning. Or possibly their spouse's or parent's soul got them there. But from the balcony I could see them gathered as a part of a flawed community in search of a taste of grace.

"This is the secret to understanding the persevering health of the church amid the narrative of decline. Churches are not healthy because they're sufficiently growing, diverse, or making a profound impact on their communities. Some are doing these things, and some are not. But all of them are healthy because when even two or three come together in the name of Jesus Christ, he is in their midst. And where Christ is present the most miraculous things are possible." (Craig Barnes, *Christian Century*, Nov. 20, 2019)

That's what's worth inviting others to experience if they haven't experienced it on their own elsewhere—the grace of God in a community of worship.

The gospel reading for today, which we did not read this morning, is the famous account in John of Jesus passing by John the Baptist and a couple of the disciples and John proclaiming of Jesus, "Look, here's the lamb of God!"

The two disciples heard this and followed Jesus. And Jesus turns to them and asks them, “What are you looking for?” And they asked him, “Rabbi, where are you staying?”

And Jesus famously responds, “Come and see.” And they followed him and spent time with him and one of them proclaimed, “We’ve found the Messiah.”

We’re called to bring light to the nations. We’re called to invite others to “come and see” what this God of grace is doing in Jesus.

Our new elders, but really all of us, are called to be the church—to use these gifts of ours, these personalities we have, these flawed histories and identities we’re all stamped with for the purpose of being a light to the nations, for the purpose of receiving the grace of God given to us in Jesus Christ and for inviting others to come and experience it too.

In the early verses of this somewhat confusing text in Isaiah 49, there’s the famous repeat of the call of Jeremiah: “The Lord called me before I was born; while I was in my mother’s womb he named me.” And then later, “You are my servant, in whom I will be glorified.”

Friends, from before we were born God has named us and called us to be a light to the nations, to be God’s servants. With the flicker that resides in you, go and be that light to the world.

And others will then know the grace of God.