

Bringing Light into a Darkened World
Session #2: The Prophecy
WNCC UWF Retreat, Harrell Center, Lake Junaluska, NC
June 14, 2024, 2 PM

Isaiah 49:1-6

CEB

¹ Listen to me, coastlands; pay attention, peoples far away.
The LORD called me before my birth,
called my name when I was in my mother's womb.
² He made my mouth like a sharp sword,
and hid me in the shadow of God's own hand.
He made me a sharpened arrow, and concealed me in God's quiver,
³ saying to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I show my glory."
⁴ But I said, "I have wearied myself in vain.
I have used up my strength for nothing."
Nevertheless, the LORD will grant me justice; my reward is with my God.
⁵ And now the LORD has decided—
the one who formed me from the womb as His servant—
to restore Jacob to God, so that Israel might return to Him.
Moreover, I'm honored in the LORD's eyes;
my God has become my strength.
⁶ He said: It is not enough, since you are my servant,
to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the survivors of Israel.
Hence, I will also appoint you as light to the nations
so that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

Our gathering here is a special time in our lives and to help remember who we see and what happens, we will take pictures—I would expect that many of us already have pictures on our cell phone. Am I right? In our modern technology, we can even create on-line albums of our digital pictures which we can then share with others or to just organize our memories. Before our modern technology though, we had cameras and we saved our developed photos in special photo albums. After my mom died and we were going through her things, I found many beautiful leather-bound albums full of pictures carefully attached to the pages with little black photo corners. While I recognized some of the people in the pictures, sadly, most were unknown to me. Before we had cameras, many recorded their special memories in diaries or letters that were kept treasured in ribbon-secured boxes. I also found such a treasure box under the bed in Mom’s guest room. It contained documents with family trees from my father’s side of the family along with hand-written histories. I was so excited about these memories that I had them spread out on the dining room table at the Parsonage where I was serving at the time. David, a high-school friend of my husband, John, was coming by to meet with John and he couldn’t help but notice my “mess.” As I shared some of what I had discovered, David picked-up one of



the family trees and recognized some names. It turned out that David and I shared the same great great grandfather! I discovered a new cousin I never knew I had! These photo albums contained precious memories for my Mom and these documented memories were important to my Dad—why didn't they share them with my sister and me? Did they think we wouldn't be interested? Did it not occur to them to pass on the memories? Were they just too busy dealing with life to label the pictures or organize the documents? **[black screen]**

Our text for today was from a time when precious memories, traditions, and practices of faith had not been passed on—they were not remembered. This was a pattern of behavior of the Israelite people. When God saved them from slavery in Egypt, they needed 40 years in the desert to learn God's commandments and to trust in God's provision. After they were established as a people in the Promised Land, they demanded of God a king to lead them like the other nations. God sent Samuel to anoint Saul to be their king and he started a long line of kings who "sinned in the eyes of God" and were shortly after replaced. The people were led astray and they forgot who created them and for what purpose.

Thankfully, God did not abandon the Israelites and God sent the Prophets to call them back into a right relationship with God.

The passage we heard read is the third of what is known as the Prophet Isaiah's Servant Songs. He proclaims: **"The LORD called me before my birth, called my name when I was in my mother's womb. He made my mouth like a sharp sword, and hid me in the shadow of God's own hand."**

[*Isaiah 49:1-2, CEB.*] Clearly "the servant knows himself to have been called by God and empowered for a hidden and, in its own mysterious way, speech-filled vocation."¹ He continues to sing of why God called him reporting God's words: **"You are my servant, Israel, in whom I show my glory."** [*Isaiah 49:3, CEB.*] "The Servant has been prepared by God for nothing less than to bring the glory of God into view. [This] call of God about which the Servant sings is a call that comes to the beloved people of

¹ Christopher R. Seitz, "The Book of Isaiah 40-66: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections" in *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VI*, ed. Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001) 429.

Israel, to the earth itself, and, [as this memory is passed down to us through the Holy Scripture, this call comes] to each [one] of us in the specificity of our own lives.”²

I can hear you thinking, “Wait a minute!” “I’m not a prophet!” “God could not possibly be calling me!”

Well the Servant also declares his unworthiness in the very next verse saying: **“I have wearied myself in vain. I have used up my strength for nothing.”** [Isaiah 49:4a, CEB.] And yet, in spite of his

failures, hope still lives in his heart and the Servant remembers—God’s high purposes still reach him.

And, he proclaims: **“Nevertheless, the LORD will grant me justice; my reward is with my God. . . .**

Moreover, I’m honored in the LORD’s eyes; my God has become my strength.” [Isaiah 49:4b, 5b,

CEB.] “It is the Servant’s memory of the mighty work of reconciliation to which God has called him that

opens a space in which the Servant can once again hear God’s voice. When God speaks again, God

not only renews the Servant’s original calling but enlarges the scope of it so that it encompasses not

only the restoration of Israel but the salvation of every nation on earth”³ declaring: **“Hence, I will also**

² Stephanie A. Paulsen, “Isaiah 49:1-7: Pastoral Perspective” in *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 1*, eds. David L. Bartlett * Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010) 244.

³ Ibid.

appoint you as a light to the nations so that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

[Isaiah 49:6b, CEB.]

As Christians, we most commonly understand this passage as anticipating “The Light of the World,” our Savior Jesus Christ. As followers of Jesus, we too are called to pick-up the mantle of the Servant—to become “light-bearers to a darkened world.” So, do NOT be afraid! The Servant testifies to the assurance of God’s promise to honor those who answer the call. We see the Servant finds strength not only in his efforts to be faithful to his call but in his RELATIONSHIP with God.⁴ Through our relationship with God, God equips us for the specific tasks to which we are called through our baptism. Our challenge is to seek out our specific calling while, at the same time, remembering that we are all disciples commissioned to go into all the world. [Matt 28:16-20.] We are to know the world in which we hope to shine as “light-bearers.” Through study and encounters like this retreat, through travel and prayer, through seeking to understand the results of our choices and the impact those results have for

⁴ Richard F. Ward, “Isaiah 49:1-7: Homiletical Perspective” in *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 1*, eds. David L. Bartlett * Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010) 247.

justice both near and far, we can, like the Servant, deepen our vocation for not only work through our local church and community but to encompass strangers across the world. Our calling to be “light-bearers” is so that we can become agents of God’s order of compassionate justice to all the world. May it be so. Amen.

