

Hopkins South Monterey

United Methodist Church

Affecting Lives Through Jesus Christ

Scripture & Sermon

January 15, 2023

Pastor Kelsey

Isaiah 49:1-7 NRSV

- 1 Listen to me, O coastlands;
pay attention, you peoples from far away!
The Lord called me before I was born;
while I was in my mother's womb he named me.
- 2 He made my mouth like a sharp sword;
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow;
in his quiver he hid me away.
- 3 And he said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."
- 4 But I said, "I have labored in vain;
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my cause is with the Lord
and my reward with my God."
- 5 And now the Lord says,
who formed me in the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him,
and that Israel might be gathered to him,
for I am honored in the sight of the Lord,
and my God has become my strength—
- 6 he says,
"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to restore the survivors of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."
- 7 Thus says the Lord,
the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One,
to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations,
the slave of rulers,

“Kings shall see and stand up;
princes, and they shall prostrate themselves,
because of the Lord, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”

Prayers & Sermon

*God of Isaiah,
you are our God, too.
You spoke to the prophets,
but your message did not end with them.
There is still work to be done,
and we pray to hear your call afresh.
Help us joyfully claim our role
as your beloved servants,
knowing that you provide all that we need
to do our work.
You walked with us before we were even born,
and you continue to hold us by the hand
each and every day of our lives.
We pray with the confidence of those
who have been filled with your light.
We pray with the assurance of those
who have been called into fellowship
with your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

My first year of seminary brought the expected intro to old Testament and intro to new Testament classes. Which, if you think about it, are classes that have a LOT of content to fit in in just a semester. But even with a packed schedule, my new Testament professor carved out some time at the end for us to share a creative extra credit project inspired by our course. It wasn't meant to be very intellectual, just a chance to have some fun or make the content relatable for a few extra points for our final grade. I think she ended up getting more submissions than she expected, as she made it clear it was for just a few points and was optional, in the midst of all the rest of our finals work. I remember there being a skit by a friend of mine, a song by another, an art piece by someone else. I was inspired by an off-hand comment my professor made one day in class. She didn't understand what memes are. We had tried to explain it to her but she still didn't understand. But I was inspired. I had a feeling she would understand better with some memes about the stuff she knew a lot about. So, I brought to class a slide show of New Testament memes to share. They went over well and by the end, my professor shared that she thought she understood memes more. But of course, since I was the one who made and shared with her all those memes, I had to include one surreptitiously in my final paper. I added it as a comment on the paper, highlighting that there was a reference to Isaiah in the scripture passage I analyzed. You see, one of the things she really drilled into us is the importance of paying attention when there is a

reference to the book of Isaiah in a New Testament text. Isaiah was a really important text to both Jewish people at the time of Jesus and early church folks. And so if Isaiah was referenced in something said or done, it is likely something of importance that the writer or speaker wanted the reader to pay attention to.

There are a lot of references to Isaiah in the New Testament, both direct quotations of the prophecies and indirect references that parallel the text of Isaiah. We particularly see a lot of those references around the birth, baptism, death, and resurrection of Jesus, because a lot of the prophecies for the coming Messiah were written in Isaiah. And the texts from Isaiah are often read as part of the Advent and Lent seasons. So, that is why during this time between Christmas/Epiphany and the beginning of Lent, I am going to stick around the Old Testament passages the lectionary offers us. We will get a chance to spend a bit more time with Isaiah, and a few other books of the Old Testament to become more familiar with that foundation that much of our Gospels are built from.

I know, the Old Testament can be a bit more boring, or a bit more confusing, or a bit more about judgment and violence. But, there is a lot of hope and good news in those texts as well, sometimes we just have to know how to look for it and understand what was being said in those ancient texts. We don't need to know the whole Old Testament by heart, but being a bit more comfortable and familiar with the overall points and some of the highlights is important to understanding our faith and the rest of scripture.

Particularly because in the time that the New Testament texts were written, it was common that those who grew up in the Jewish faith were very familiar with what their scriptures said and likely had many passages memorized. What the texts said helped them understand who Jesus was as the Messiah. So, they wouldn't have missed the references to those texts in the new Testament writings. But often enough we miss them, or skip right by them without giving them much thought. So, let's spend a little time in the Hebrew Bible and make ourselves a little more familiar with what came before Jesus.

Today's Old Testament text brings us to the middle of the book of Isaiah. So, understanding what is being talked about in this later chapter would probably be helped by a reminder of what came before chapter 49, and what the book of Isaiah is about as a whole. So, the first thing we have to know about the book of Isaiah is one of the major prophet books, specifically telling of the life and prophecies of Isaiah. To tell us a bit more about what Isaiah is all about, I am going to share with you this wonderful resource I learned about in seminary called the Bible Project that gives thorough and understandable overviews of each of the books of the Bible. They have said it so well, I don't see the point in trying to say it a different way for you myself. Isaiah is such a long and complex book that it takes 2 videos to explain it all. I won't be showing you all of both videos today, but the intro to the whole book and then the part about our area of scripture for today.

Let's start with the intro to the whole book.

1:37

([📺 Overview: Isaiah 1-39 watch up to 1:37](#))

Now let's jump to that second part where our scripture for today comes from.

2:44 total

([📺 Overview: Isaiah 40-66 Watch up to the 4:26 mark](#))

Now that we have some more context and a better understanding of what is going on overall, let's revisit the scripture real quick. I know I find that often times with these more poetic texts they take me a couple read throughs to understand them anyway.

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pay attention, you peoples from far away!
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while I was in my mother's womb he named me.
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Israel, in whom I will be glorified."
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5 And now the Lord says,
who formed me in the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him,
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for I am honored in the sight of the Lord,
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6 he says,
"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
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I will give you as a light to the nations,
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to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations,
the slave of rulers,
"Kings shall see and stand up;
princes, and they shall prostrate themselves,
because of the Lord, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

Israel 49:1-7 is considered one of four servant songs in Isaiah. Two of them come up on Palm Sunday and Good Friday. Who is speaking the song is a little unclear. The servant is named Israel, but is referred to in ways that indicate an individual or a group of people. Perhaps it is intentionally vague so that whoever is hearing it can find their own place in it. No matter if the servant is intended to be an individual, many people, or a reference to the Messiah, we can hear from the words shared in their song that they

belong to God. We hear a little bit more about the servant, a mouth like a sharp sword, themselves like an arrow in God's quiver. Their words and actions are their power. The sword and arrow are power for justice and truth, not violence. Their actions are not in vain when they are for God and God's kingdom. Then we are told of the servant's mission: "bring Jacob back to him and that Israel might be gathered to him" is to mean that the first step is to return from Babylonian exile. But it isn't the servant's job to make the return happen, God is working on that. The servant's job is a more nuanced job, "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." This may not seem too out of place for us who are used to hearing the commands in the Gospel to make disciples of all nations and things like that. But in the time of Isaiah, that was quite the radical change in plan. Typically in those times, God was only working with the Israelite people, God's people, believers. But here, God has directed the servant to be a light to the nations to the end of the earth, which would include many non-Israelites and non-believers. This servant who will be shining the light of God's New Jerusalem, New Creation, New Kingdom is to share that it is for everyone. But this shining of the light of the news of salvation isn't to be violent thing. Again, the sword is the servant's words, the arrows the servant's actions. The servant bears the light for the world so that others can see something that they had not previously seen, that they can now see more clearly. They shine the light, but do not force others to be part of the light, do not coerce or even convert. The light inspires humility, peace, justice and mercy, and reveals God's love for all creation. Shining the light is about revealing the love and connectedness of God that often goes unseen.

This group here today is surely not who the writer of Isaiah had in mind when they wrote this text. Perhaps they didn't expect the servant to be the Messiah or the church as a whole either. We can't be sure who was meant to be the Servant. But, we can continue the legacy of what that servant was called to do. We are the ones who can continue to bear God's light in the world and we must remember that God's work is open to all. We are called to bear the light to all nations to the end of the earth. Perhaps we ought to read that not as literally these days when it is easier to reach far and wide. It isn't just about how literally wide we can shine God's light, but how we can truly share God's love and light with all people. Not just those in our church family or in our social circles, but everyone. As we start this new year, as we have some time during the quieter winter months, let us all be thinking and planning ways that we, as individuals and as a church family, can share God's light, God's love with all peoples.

Prayer of Confession (Isaiah 49, Psalm 40, 1 Corinthians 1)

Faithful God,

you call us to be saints,

but we are more comfortable

with the role of sinner;

you call us to be your servants,

but we worry that we lack the skills

to do your work;

you put a new song of praise in our mouths,

*but we stumble on unfamiliar words;
you show us the work to be tackled,
but we turn away defiant,
insisting we have more important things to do.
Put your song on our lips and in our hearts,
and remind us of the joy that awaits us
when we put our trust in you.
Guide us into the light
of your unwavering, never-ending,
and grace-filled love. Amen.*

Words of Assurance (1 Corinthians 1)
*God is faithful and ever-present.
The God who knew us before our birth
loves us still and strengthens us,
that we will one day be blameless.
Through the gift of Jesus Christ,
God offers forgiveness, grace, and mercy.
Enter into the light!*