

A Light to the Nations

Meditation on Isaiah 49:1-6

Jan. 15, 2017

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

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. 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. And he said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.' 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.' 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.' 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.'

Mary Jackson is one of three African American women whose stories are featured in the movie, *Hidden Figures*, based on Margot Lee Shetterly's book of the same name. Mary, Katherine Johnson and Dorothy Vaughan were exceptionally talented women. They graduated from college with degrees in math in an age when few women--let alone African American women--graduated college. They taught in black schools in the segregated South before they landed jobs working for NACA (a precursor of NASA) at

the Langley Memorial Aeronautical Laboratory in Hampton, VA. They worked in the little-known women's all black "West Computing Group" where they functioned as human "computers."

Mary Jackson graduated with degrees in math and physical science and taught school in Maryland before coming to work at the West Computing Group in 1951 at the age of 26. Two years later, she was sent to the East Side Group, to work alongside several white computers. The first day on the job, writes Shetterly in her book, Mary asked the other women where the bathroom was. They giggled. "How would they know where to find **her** bathroom? The nearest bathroom was unmarked, which meant it was available to any of the white women and off limits to the black women.... Angry and humiliated, she stormed off on her own to find her way to the restroom.... In the moment when the white women laughed at her, Mary had been demoted from professional mathematician to a second class human being." Still fuming as she made it back to the West Computing Group later that day, she ran into a good-natured aeronautical engineer who worked in the Four by Four Supersonic Pressure Tunnel. "Kaz" as people called him, was white. He listened as she told him what happened. Then he said, "Why don't you come work for me?" It was a turning point in her career.

Eventually, she would take additional courses and join a special training program that led to her promotion to "aerospace engineer" where she analyzed data from wind tunnel experiments and real-world aircraft flight experiments. She worked with flight engineers at NASA, writing or co-authoring 12 technical papers for NACA and NASA.

Mary Jackson did not only achieve success that had not been achieved by African American women before her. She looked beyond herself and sought

to help other women and minorities advance in their careers. She advised them how to study so that they could change their titles from "mathematician" to "engineer" and increase their chances of promotion. After 34 years at NASA, she reached the highest level of engineer that was possible without becoming a supervisor and then decided to take a pay cut and change positions to become an administrator in the Equal Opportunity Specialist field. She returned to Langley where she worked to make changes and highlight women and other minorities who were accomplished in the field.

The prophet Isaiah, thousands of years ago, urges God's people to do the same--to look beyond themselves--their own wellbeing, even when God's people were themselves a struggling minority, a people without a homeland. This section of Isaiah was probably written in the 6th century during the Babylonian exile. Ch. 49 begins by identifying the audience as not just God's people who have been dispersed around the world but all "peoples." "Listen to me, O coastlands (or islands), pay attention, you peoples from far away!" He emphasizes Israel's special calling and relationship to the Lord, a calling that was ordained before their birth. This is not an individual call story to a single, reluctant prophet, as we find with other Old Testament accounts of Moses, Jeremiah, and Jonah. The prophet is speaking for all Israel and for us, who have been grafted in through Jesus Christ, saying to the world, "The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me."

These are promises we can claim today! God has made our mouths like a sharp sword to proclaim the truth--God's Word, which is compared to a

sword in the New Testament. Ephesians 6:17, “Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.” Hebrews 4:12 calls the word of God, “alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” We are hidden, protected, safe “in the shadow of his hand.” We are made powerful to do God’s work, but consider the imagery of being God’s “polished arrow”-- who is the one who guides and empowers us? God! Who is the one who sends us out and chooses where we should go? God! We are assured that in us, God will be glorified.

But now, Isaiah acknowledges that Israel hasn’t always done what is right or been obedient. God’s people haven’t done the right things for the right reasons. “I have *labored in vain*, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity,” Isaiah says. Still, God will continue to be faithful to God’s people in ancient days, just as the Lord is faithful to us today as we seek to do His will, and not making idols of anything in this world. “Yet surely my cause is with the LORD,” Isaiah says, “and my reward with my God.” God is not ashamed of Israel or us. We are “honored” in his sight. He is our “strength.”

Israel is comforted that although they are scattered and exiled and are feeling wounded and forgotten, they are still God’s “servant.” God will gather them, once again, and bring them back to Himself. Jesus uses this same language of oneness with His disciples when he prays for them--and for all His followers to come-- as a witness to the world in John 17:20-21: “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe, in me through their word,²¹ that they may all be one. As you,

Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

This passage in Isaiah reminds us of Jesus’ promise to His disciples in John 14 that although he is going soon to be with the Father in heaven, he will not leave His followers “orphaned.” He will come again! “If I go and prepare a place for you,” Jesus says in 14:3, “I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”

And sounding very much like the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19, “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations,” we hear God’s people Israel being called to share God’s salvation with the world. What is particularly touching to me is that Israel is God’s gift to the world--just as we are God’s gift to the world.

God speaks through Isaiah, “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; (so) I will **give** you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

Isaiah uses the familiar language of the messenger being “light” in the darkness, just as we hear Jesus saying in Matthew 5:14, “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.”

But we are only “light” because we have Christ living in us. “I am the light of the world.” Jesus says in John 8:12. “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” We cannot be a light to the nations and a force for social change in our communities, country and world if we do not have faith that Christ can do this work through us. We cannot do this in our own strength! We can take courage in knowing that we can rely on the One who guides and sends us out like powerful, polished arrows,

but at the same time, keeps us safe from harm, hidden in the “shadow of his hand.”

Katherine Johnson worked at the segregated West Computing Group from 1953 until 1958, when the colored computing pool was disbanded, and she became an aerospace technologist. In her career with NASA, she calculated the trajectory for the space flight of Alan Shepard in 1959 and the launch window for his 1961 Mercury mission. She plotted backup navigational charts for astronauts in case of electronic failures. And in 1962, when NASA used electronic computers for the first time to calculate John Glenn’s orbit around Earth, officials called on her to verify the computer’s numbers when Glenn asked for her personally and refused to fly unless she verified the calculations. President Obama mentions this and some of her other accomplishments, just before awarding her with the Presidential Medal of Freedom on Nov. 24, 2015. She was 96 years old.

“Growing up in West Virginia, Katherine Johnson counted everything,” Obama said. “She counted steps. She counted dishes. She counted the distance to the church. By 10 years old, she was in high school. By 18, she had graduated from college with degrees in math and French. As an African-American woman, job options were limited -- but she was eventually hired as one of several female mathematicians for the agency that would become NASA. Katherine calculated the flight path for America’s first mission in space, and the path that put Neil Armstrong on the moon. She was even asked to double-check the computer’s math on John Glenn’s orbit around the Earth. So if you think your job is pressure-packed -- hers meant that forgetting to carry the one might send somebody

floating off into the Solar System. In her 33 years at NASA, Katherine was a pioneer who broke the barriers of race and gender, showing generations of young people that everyone can excel in math and science, and reach for the stars.”

Let us pray. Lord God, thank you for your love for us and for your promise to gather us one day all to yourself. Thank you that you have given us the gift of your Son, who is our salvation, so that we may live new lives in Him and be made ONE in him. Help us, Lord, to live each day as your humble servants, grateful for all that we have and all that we are and working to correct the injustices in our society. Forgive us, Lord, that we have been selfish and haven't loved our needy neighbors around the world as we should, that we haven't sought to set the oppressed free and given voice to the voiceless. Stir us, Lord, to give ourselves to you fully and surrender our lives to your will. Send us out by the power of your Spirit so that we may be polished arrows, carrying the sword that is Your Word. May we truly be a light to all the nations so that all may come to know your salvation. In Christ we pray. Amen.