

Sermon Series: Glory Revealed - "Give You as a Light"

Isaiah 49:1-7

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Worship Question: How have you been specifically gifted to fulfill your calling to share the light of God's love with others?

Not to toot my own horn, but did you know that I have a bronze medal in wrestling? It's true. When I was five years old I was on a wrestling team. I was the littlest kid on the team and many of the other clubs we went up against did not have anyone as small as me, so I didn't get to wrestle too much. But at the end of the season we had a tournament and the only two losses I had that whole year were to the kids that took first and second place. And you're probably thinking, that's great, but what does that have to do with our scripture for today? Well, nothing. I just wanted you to know.

But when we say we wrestle with something, we grapple with it. We struggle with it. We toss it around, we move around it. We come at it from different directions. When we wrestle with scripture, we come at it from different angles and try to figure out what it is saying.

Sometimes we read scripture and we take it as just a story or just a piece of history. And sure it is great to hear some of it, but how do we use it? One of my professors in seminary had this thing he called the CIA approach. (I know I've said this before.) C, clarify what the scripture is saying. I, identify what it says about God. A, apply it to your everyday life.

Our scripture today from Isaiah 49 is an interesting one because when we read it, we need to read it at different levels. Which is where the wrestling comes in. The author, who is assumed to be Isaiah, is speaking in the first person. And so he is talking about himself. But this prophetic text also is read as a description of the Messiah. And the original audience of these words would have heard that and known that. But as we read this today, we can see ourselves in this text as well. No, not as the Messiah, but with the same kind of charge that Jesus gave us, where God will give us "as a light to the nations, that [God's] salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6). And just so you are aware, I was wrestling with either having the scripture read today from the NRSV or the NLT, and so I will be bouncing around between them both a bit.

This call from the prophet is a call to all the nations. The chapter opens with a loud voice calling out to the coastland, to the distant lands, to the very edges of the known world. God's salvation is for all people. And we are called to shine the light of God's salvation to all people. That has been the message from the very beginning. God's chosen people were blessed to be a blessing.

When we look at Abraham's original calling, God tells him as much: "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless

you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3).

Abraham was chosen. The Israelites were chosen. We were chosen before we came into being as individuals or even as the community we call the church. We were given a name and a task to bring light into the world and glory to God. But do we always feel up to the task? If we are honest, probably not.

Look at today's scripture. Do you ever feel yourself as the one described in these words? Tell me if this resonates with you: "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" (Isaiah 49:1b-2).

Some of the wording of this is quite beautiful. But we may read it and have no clue what it says. Isaiah is saying here that God called him from before he was born. God had a plan for Isaiah from before he even drew his first breath. Isaiah's words of prophecy for the people were sharp and pointed. His words given by God hit their mark and served a purpose. Being hidden in God's hand, or like a polished arrow hidden in a quiver, Isaiah was prepared and ready to go for just the right moment.

Do you feel like that? Do you feel that God called you before you even existed? That God gave you words to use and to speak that are powerful and pointed? That God prepared you and set you in place ready to go at just the right time? Maybe that time hasn't come yet, but still, you're ready to go? All to bring God glory? Does that describe you? I pray that it does. But I know that I don't always feel that way.

I know there are times that I feel more like how the author responds to God's statement of "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified" (v. 3). Isaiah responds, "I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity" (v. 4a). I like how the NLT puts it: "But my work seems so useless! I have spent my strength for nothing and to no purpose."

How many times do we do good and speak out and help others, and it just feels like a drop in the bucket? That there is so much pain and suffering and heartache all around us, and no matter what we do, it doesn't seem to get any better. I love the honesty of scripture. Where these authors write this stuff down. Sure, God called me from before I was born. God prepared me to be this arrow to hit the target and do some great things. But man, I feel like I'm spinning my wheels. That everything I do means absolutely nothing. I feel like I'm trying to bail out a sinking ship with a tiny cup.

In the first thirty-nine chapters of this book, Isaiah warned the people of impending invasion and exile, and they didn't listen. It happened and now he's trying to give them hope of life in and after exile. Yet verse 4 doesn't stop there with words of frustration and failure. He continues, "yet surely my cause is with the Lord and my reward with my God" (v. 4b). The NLT says, "Yet I leave it all in the Lord's hand; I will trust God for my reward."

He's pretty much saying, I am not worthy, but I am called anyway. The task is beyond me, but I am called to do it anyway. The vision is bigger than I am, but I am called anyway. The light is beyond me, but I am called to be a carrier of that light until rulers shall see and bow before the goodness and the glory of God. I may never see that day in this life, but I will carry that light anyway. A lot of times these prophets

spoke of things they never saw come to fruition. And yet they spoke the message all the same.

When I was in elementary school, one day our class went outside and planted a tree. I'm not sure if it was for Earth Day or Arbor Day or what. But we gathered around as we planted this little tiny tree probably about one or two feet tall in front of our school. I lived right across the street from the school and so I didn't really notice the tree much as it grew because I saw it practically every day.

Having moved back to the area after being away for a while, occasionally I would drive through town with new friends to show them my old stomping grounds, and I was amazed to see that little tree that we planted is now taller than the two-story school building. But for many of the people in my class, they might have moved away and never saw that tree again. They may never know how big it has gotten. Or how many birds have found refuge in its branches. Or how much of our air it has cleaned. But does that mean they should never have helped to plant that tree in the first place? Of course not.

The same goes for us. When God called Abram out of the land of Ur, God spoke of Abram's descendants being as numerous as the stars in the sky or the grains of sand on the shore. By the time Abraham died, he had two children, one legitimately. He lived his life on a promise he knew he would never see come true. But he trusted in God and faithfully followed where God would lead, even though he would never see the fruition of that promise.

Again, at this point Isaiah is speaking to a people in exile. They had been warned, they didn't listen, and now they had been conquered and taken from their homeland. In chapter 40 Isaiah shifted from warning the people to looking at what life could be like after exile. And here we are in chapter 49, where the prophet is talking on behalf of God, as God addressed the people of Israel in the last verse of what we read today. I want to read it from the NLT: "The Lord, the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel, says to the one who is despised and rejected by the nations, to the one who is the servant of rulers: Kings will stand at attention when you pass by. Princes will also bow low because of the Lord, the faithful one, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you" (v. 7).

Some connected this to Jesus, and rightfully so, one who would be despised and rejected, and yet Lord and ruler of all. But can you think of the feeling it would be for a people that was so beaten down to know that a bright future awaited them? That those who once again were ruled over by a foreign regime would one day get the respect of all those they currently served. But it wasn't because of who they were, or how powerful and mighty they became. But because of who God is. And the same can be said for us.

We may go through times where we feel down and rejected, where we feel at the end of our rope, where all our work is in vain. We may feel that the words we speak just bounce off the wall and make no difference in this world. But the words of this scripture remind us that nothing can hold a candle to the fact that we serve the Lord, who is faithful to us. And that our hope is in God.

We were created for a purpose. We were created unique and special. We were called before we were even born. God gave us words to speak. God polished us and set us in a quiver to be used at just the right time. Our worship question for today is, how have you been specifically gifted to fulfill your calling to share the light of God's

love with others? Because that is our ultimate purpose. To be a light to the nations. To show God's salvation to the world.

I go to see a spiritual director, and I went this week. And the question that my spiritual director always asks is "how do you come into this space?" And my answer this week was "weary." Because lately I have felt that I have just been doing, doing, doing, doing. A lot of little things just piled up, really stopped me from getting some big things done that I wanted to get done. And she asked me just to pause and sit in the silence and to listen to what God was asking of me.

And as I listened, literally, the word "do" just bounced around in my head. I have to "do this" and "do that." I literally saw the word "DO" in big letters in my mind. And I had to stop myself, because in that moment I wasn't trying to do anything. I was trying to be present with God. And as I thought of that, the word changed in my mind from "do" to "be." And that is what I sometimes struggle with, being rather than doing.

This scripture today doesn't tell us to do light. This scripture today tells us to be light. That God is giving us as light. That it is the very thing that we are. That it is our essence. It is not some facade that we are to put on or something that we can fake our way through, but that it is actually who we are and it radiates out of us. We are to simply shine. And we do that by being who we are and sharing the love of Christ. Because as Christians, those who choose to follow Christ, that should be our nature. A nature of love, kindness, forgiveness, and service to others.

We are all equipped to share those aspects of love and kindness and such, but we do so differently. They are all the same aspects, just expressed in different ways. It is the same love, just some people express it through words, while others may show love through gifts, while others would prefer to do nice things for each other. And that comes out of who we are as God's beloved children.

Can you imagine what this world would be like if all who claimed to follow Christ actually radiated the light of Christ? And those who saw that light were so taken by the love and forgiveness they felt that they too decided to follow the light of Christ themselves? And then they too started to shine the light of Christ? I long for the day when that will happen, when all the world will stand at attention and give respect and glory to God.

But for now, we live on in the promises of God, that that future will happen. We may see, we may not. But regardless, it doesn't change the fact that we are to be light. We are given as "a light to the nations, that [God's] salvation may reach to the end of the earth." And so as we move out into this world, let us strengthen our light in the love of God. Let us plant the seeds of love and kindness wherever we go. Let those trees spring up around us. We may never see how large they grow, but let us put our trust in God that the Lord will do amazing things through our faithfulness, as long as we keep our eyes set on Jesus Christ.

We have been called. We have been prepared. We have been chosen. So let us shine the light of God in this darkened world, so that all may see God's glory and know the salvation of our Lord for themselves.