

## Scriptures

### Isaiah 49:1-7

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.  
<sup>2</sup> 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.  
<sup>3</sup> And he said to me, "You are my servant,  
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."  
<sup>4</sup> 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."  
<sup>5</sup> 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—  
<sup>6</sup> 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."  
<sup>7</sup> 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."

### Psalms 40:1-11

<sup>1</sup> I waited patiently for the Lord;  
he inclined to me and heard my cry.  
<sup>2</sup> He drew me up from the desolate pit,  
out of the miry bog,  
and set my feet upon a rock,  
making my steps secure.  
<sup>3</sup> He put a new song in my mouth,  
a song of praise to our God.

Many will see and fear,  
and put their trust in the Lord.  
<sup>4</sup> Happy are those who make  
the Lord their trust,  
who do not turn to the proud,  
to those who go astray after false gods.  
<sup>5</sup> You have multiplied, O Lord my God,  
your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us;  
none can compare with you.  
Were I to proclaim and tell of them,  
they would be more than can be counted.  
<sup>6</sup> Sacrifice and offering you do not desire,  
but you have given me an open ear.  
Burnt offering and sin offering  
you have not required.  
<sup>7</sup> Then I said, "Here I am;  
in the scroll of the book it is written of me.  
<sup>8</sup> I delight to do your will, O my God;  
your law is within my heart."  
<sup>9</sup> I have told the glad news of deliverance  
in the great congregation;  
see, I have not restrained my lips,  
as you know, O Lord.  
<sup>10</sup> I have not hidden your saving help within my heart,  
I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation;  
I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness  
from the great congregation.  
<sup>11</sup> Do not, O Lord, withhold  
your mercy from me;  
let your steadfast love and your faithfulness  
keep me safe forever.

#### [John 1:29-42](#)

<sup>29</sup> The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! <sup>30</sup> This is He of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me.' <sup>31</sup> I did not know Him; but that He should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water."

<sup>32</sup> And John bore witness, saying, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him. <sup>33</sup> I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' <sup>34</sup> And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God."

<sup>35</sup> Again, the next day, John stood with two of his disciples. <sup>36</sup> And looking at Jesus as He walked, he said, "Behold the Lamb of God!"

<sup>37</sup> The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus. <sup>38</sup> Then Jesus turned, and seeing them following, said to them, "What do you seek?"

They said to Him, “Rabbi” (which is to say, when translated, Teacher), “where are You staying?”  
<sup>39</sup> He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where He was staying, and remained with Him that day (now it was about the tenth hour).

<sup>40</sup> One of the two who heard John *speaking*, and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. <sup>41</sup> He first found his own brother Simon, and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated, the Christ). <sup>42</sup> And he brought him to Jesus.

Now when Jesus looked at him, He said, “You are Simon the son of Jonah. You shall be called Cephas” (which is translated, A Stone).

### Sermon: Called

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

This morning we heard the second of the servant songs in Isaiah. There are four of them in total; they are poems written about a certain servant of YHWH. This servant is called to lead the nations, to be a light for the nations. We find out that he is horribly abused; things don’t go well for this suffering servant, though in the end he is rewarded.

Just who is this servant? Who are we reading about? Who is the one formed in the womb to be God’s servant whom Kings rise to meet and Princes prostrate themselves before? I know a lot of you want to say Jesus – we’re in church so the answer must always be Jesus. But let’s not jump to conclusions, let’s turn to the Bible and see what it has to tell us on the subject.

The book of Isaiah was written in three movements: before the Babylonian exile, during the exile, and after the Israelites returned to Judah. The servant songs are all found in the central part of the book, which was written while many of the Israelites were living in Babylon.

I’ll spare you the long history lesson – the short version is that due to some trickery and manipulation by King Jehoiakim, Jerusalem was besieged and was taken by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Many of the useful Jews were taken back to Babylon as servants, the others were left in the city and forced to pay tribute to the conquering King.

At this point, things were not looking good for Judah. The northern kingdom of Israel had fallen years before; the southern kingdom of Judah had held strong, but with Judah conquered there were no longer free Israelites in the promised land. Those who were taken away into captivity longed to return home, while those who were left behind lived in the ruins of a once great city, scavenging through the rubble for sustenance.

No more secure walls, no more palaces, and most importantly, no more temple. With no temple, there were no more sacrifices, and with no sacrifices Israel’s standing with God was in question. Certainly, the destruction of the city would indicate that God was no longer with them.

It was during this time of upheaval and fear that the servant songs were written. We heard the first of them last week, though my preaching centered on the baptism of Jesus. Now we are exploring the second song. Just who is it that is being written of?

Because we are Christians and we have the benefit of living 2500 years after this book was written, most of us would easily identify Jesus as the servant. It's very simple and obvious to us. But it's not that simple.

Isaiah is a prophetic book; the songs are prophetic songs. They speak of a servant who has been ordained before birth to be an agent of justice and mercy; a prophet who is called to restore the nation to God. This is exactly what the people need at the time that it was written – both the exiles and the ones left at home. They need a word of hope, but more importantly they need this servant leader.

Prophecies have to impact and affect the people who receive them – God would not give a word to his people that they cannot comprehend for centuries. There is no comfort or hope in that, and God doesn't play with us in that way.

So, if this song is about Jesus, then it can have no relevance to the Israelites who received the message. Knowing that a saviour will come in 600 years has no meaning or value to them at all. You've heard the expression justice delayed is justice denied – if that is the case then justice delayed 25 generations is no longer justice.

It certainly is true that Jesus is the fulfillment of these songs – he is the perfect version of the servant described. But Jesus is the perfect fulfillment of sacrifice as well, and we don't read the Bible backwards and assume that every sacrifice made in the temple was therefore Jesus.

So, when we read this song let's not jump to the simple conclusion that Jesus is the servant. Jesus was the greatest servant, certainly, but not necessarily who Isaiah was writing of back in 585 BC.

Many scholars think the servant King Jehoiakim's exiled son Jeconiah, and that may be the case. There is another answer put forward by theologians that is much more practical and closer to home. For us to truly receive the prophetic message that is being given we have to stop looking outside of ourselves. You are the servant. We are the servant.

In verse 3 God says to his servant 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.' Israel – God's people. That's us. That's who we are. We are the servant, called to be prophets, called to be a light to the nations.

Does that scare you? Who among you wants to be an evangelist? I don't see any hands going up out there.

I think many of us react in the same way that Moses did. We say 'who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' Or we are like Jeremiah, and declare 'I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.'

The servant in our reading this morning says something similar. 'I have laboured in vain,' he says. 'I have spent my strength for nothing.' Essentially he is saying that he is ineffectual, that he tries and fails. I don't know about you, but I can certainly see myself in that way.

The servant finds himself unable to live up to his calling, all the strength God gave me I have spent for nothing, he grieves. But in spite of this failure, hope still lives in the heart of the servant. Even though the servant has worked with no result, he remembers God's call; God's high purposes still reach him.

Indeed, even in the face of the servant's failure God lifts him out of the pit and puts a new song in his heart. The problem, God says, is that the goal wasn't big enough. I tasked you with raising up the tribes of Jacob, that is, the Jewish people. It is too light a thing for you. Now, try again, and this time you are to be a light to the Gentiles and spread salvation to the ends of the earth.

Remember, this is not God speaking to someone else – this is God speaking to us – both as faithful individuals and as an obedient community. We are to be a light to the Gentiles and spread salvation to the ends of the earth. We are all called to be prophets and evangelists. To the whole world.

So how do we do that? How do we become valuable servants of God? The gospel reading from John shows us a few examples. First we meet John the Baptizer – now this is a prophet with few equals. John has no fear; he calls everyone to repentance; to the religious leaders he says they are as a pack of snakes fleeing destruction; to the king he says 'it is not lawful for you to be with your brother's wife.' John speaks truth to power in a way few of us can, and not surprisingly John is thrown in jail and later beheaded.

But not all witness is so confrontational. When we look at this same John the Baptizer we also see a softer evangelism. One day John was standing with a couple of his disciples and when Jesus walked by he said to them 'Look! The Lamb of God.'

Those two disciples followed Jesus. One of them, Andrew, later in the day went to find his brother. He said to him 'We have found the Messiah,' and brought him to Jesus.

When we read these passages it would seem as though evangelism is not so much about doctrinal proclamation as it is about paying attention and giving voice to the way God has manifested in our own lives. John the Baptizer shared his revelation of Jesus as the one who takes away sin. Andrew said to his brother we have found the chosen one. A little further in John's gospel Phillip tells others that he has found the one about whom Moses and the prophets wrote. The psalmist in our passage today describes God as the one who has lifted him up from the pit and put a new song in his heart. Paying attention to the way God shows up in your life is where evangelism starts.

What this means is that to be God's servant, to be evangelists, we don't need to rush off to seminary and take courses on how to explain the Christian faith in ten minutes. The words we share are simply the words that tell our honest story--nothing more, nothing less. The words of the evangelist are not threats but testimony, the telling of our encounter with God's love. We are not expected to provide answers but what we offer is authenticity. Notice how the psalmist says, 'I was in the pit.' He simply tells the truth about his life.

We have much in common with the servant in the song. The song was written primarily for those Jews in Babylon, who were struggling to hold onto their faith while living in a culture that held them in contempt. People of different faiths surrounded them, they were pressured to conform, to be like those around them – remember what Daniel and his friends had to go through.

We too are concerned about our survival as a community of faith; we Christians are a minority in this country. How can we be in relationship with a multitude of people from other backgrounds and other faiths without losing our own identity?

It turns out that the answer is given in the servant songs. We are to be a light to the nations, so that God's salvation will reach to the ends of the earth. It sounds overwhelming, for sure. But really it's not as scary as we think. In some way, God has touched each one of you who are here today. Each of you are a chapter in God's epic narrative of salvation. Tell your story. Just tell your story and you will not have laboured in vain.

Amen.