

A Light to the Nations

Sermon for Epiphany 2, January 15, 2023

Readings: Isaiah 49:1-7; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42; Psalm 40:1-12

Sermon text: “It is too slight 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.”

Listen to me, O coastlands,
pay attention, you peoples from far away!

Our passage from the prophet Isaiah begins with a call out to the peoples of the world, both near—on the coast of Palestine—and far. That includes us, far away in both space and time. Inspired by the holy Spirit, he calls for our attention, so let us take a few minutes and closely attend. Let’s closely read this passage together.

After calling for us to listen, the prophet announces who he is, his qualifications for demanding our attention:

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.”

See that?—God names the prophet Israel, not Isaiah, thus identifying the individual prophet with the people he has been teaching. Then the prophet shares that he has not felt that he has lived up to his God given vocation, rather he has felt like a polished arrow or sharp sword that has never been tried in combat. What prophecy he has proclaimed has not accomplished what he had hoped for:

But I said, “I have labored in vain,
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;

But he consoles himself with the thought:

yet surely my cause is with the Lord,
and my reward with my God.”

Then the tone shifts, beginning with a parenthetical quasi-boast about his call to be a prophet to Jacob/Israel:

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--

And then comes the best part:

God 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.”

Wow. Not just a prophet to the Israelites but to the nations, the gentiles, the peoples—to the ends of the earth (as Jesus commissioned the disciples to go baptized the nations). The big reveal: God’s plan is not to create a special class of saved people, one nation among all the others, but to save all the nations through that special nation to whom the word of God has been given, the Torah or Way shown—as a light or beacon to follow.

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.”

Our passage concludes with a remarkable coda or comment: the prophet once again identified with the people of Israel, those chosen by God to be a light to other peoples through its bearing the word of God, the Torah, among them, a people often despised—and even today witnessing a surge of anti-semitism—who yet deserve to be greatly honored.

For Christians this is echoed by the passage in Philippians which speaks of one who emptied himself of divinity and became human, who was despised, a slave, even suffering a criminal's death on the cross, but who will rise and rule and in the end all knees will bow on heaven and earth and under the earth.

There is in short still a long way to go to realize fully the prophetic meaning of this passage composed over 2500 years ago.

And if Jacob/Israel is still walking the long road of redemption, then that is also true of other peoples both honored and despised.

We honor Martin Luther King Jr tomorrow with a national holiday—and rightly so. He was a giant of a prophet, a great leader though a fallible man. A martyr who even close to his death was evolving his understanding and message. The great civil rights struggle of the sixties, which resulted in so many legislative triumphs despite such bitter opposition, by no means exhausted his prophetic task. His last campaign was against poverty; his last great speeches raised the sword of truth and arrows of justice against the three evils of racism, poverty and war. He is honored indeed, yet now he must also endure the myths and burnishing of those who like to look up to the statue of a hero but prefer not to seriously consider what it will take to finish the work. Even as we honor the man, the just cause and celebrate the achievements, we just acknowledge the gap still to go, the gap between the world as it is and the world as it should be.

That gap MLK stood in and would not let people look away. He knew conflict, agitation, discomfort are necessary parts of progress. We cannot simply look the other way, revel in the good parts of our history, but not the tragic sins of slavery and genocide, sing our songs of triumph but neglect our laments. Both are part of the truth—what the Preacher called for when he wrote there is a time for singing and a time for tears, a time to celebrate and a time to mourn. We as a people, an almost chosen people as Abraham Lincoln once put it, are like the people of Israel—called and blessed with great ideals and inspiring leaders—and yet prophets still rightly call us to account for neglecting the weightier matters of justice while boasting of our sacrifices and generous tithes to the poor. If we would be a light to other nations, we must be true to our own ideals.

Let me conclude with a quote from the prophet Martin, from a 1967 speech on the three evils of racism, poverty and war. There are many fine things he said on these issues—and I encourage all of us to take some time tomorrow to listen again to some of the great speeches and read again his Letter from Birmingham Jail. But this quote speaks not to the issues to the character of those who hear the word of truth, the call of God and duty. It is a prophetic word aimed at the heart of each one of us in times of danger and conflict (and what times are free of them?):

“On some positions, cowardice asks the question, Is it safe? Expediency asks the question, Is it politic? Vanity asks the question, Is it popular? But conscience asks the question, Is it right? And there are times you must take a stand where it is neither safe nor politic nor popular, but you must do it because it is right.”

Let us always strive to do what is right, what is honorable, what God speaks to the heart through prophets and our own conscience.

In Christ’s name, amen.

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins, Rector
Grace Church, Millbrook, NY