Isaiah 49:1-7
Epiphany 2A + January 19, 2014
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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The Servant

The Word of the Lord from Isaiah 49:6: “It is too light a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make You as a light for the nations, that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

I. Jesus in Isaiah 49

Look at all that the Servant has going for Him! This is the second of the four Servant Songs in the book of Isaiah (we heard the first one last week about how He comes to bring justice), and it’s bursting with comfort for you so that you might be confident that Jesus is the Savior who has gotten the job of your salvation done.

The song begins: “Listen to Me, O coastlands and give attention you peoples from afar.” “From afar” would include places far from Jerusalem—places like Boise and Meridian and Star. The Servant isn’t some regional deity in the Middle East who will help you if you live within a 200-mile radius of His stomping grounds. With the first words of the text, He declares, “Listen up, people of Good Shepherd, because this is Good News for you.”

The Servant continues: “The LORD called Me from the womb, from the body of My mother He named My name.” The Servant is God’s Servant from the start: He’s not some guy that the Lord calls upon partway through life to do some heroic task. He is the Servant from conception, and He is named before He is born—for the angel appears to Joseph and says, “You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

Next verse: “[The LORD] 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.” There’s two big things in that verse: first of all, the Servant’s weapon for battle is His mouth, made like a sharp sword. He will conquer His enemies by speaking His holy Word. Second, He’s a special fighter. He’s not practice arrow to waste at the range. He’s the polished arrow, the one to use when you take the shot. He’s hidden in Yahweh’s hand and quiver until it’s time to fire: in the fullness of time, He’s revealed so that He might defeat sin, death and devil.

Next: “And [the LORD] said to Me, ‘You are My Servant, Israel, in Whom I will be glorified.’” The LORD calls the Servant “Israel:” He says, “You’re all of My people boiled down to one.” In God’s eyes, the Servant becomes all of Israel. If the Servant lives a sinless and holy life, then God sees all of His people as sinless and holy. Conversely, if His people sin, then God holds the Servant accountable for all the sins of His people. You’ve seen this in the past two Sundays’ Gospel readings. Two weeks ago, you heard of Jesus traveling to Egypt and back—and doing so perfectly, even as an infant. He made the same trek as the people of Israel in Exodus, but He did it without the grumbling, the doubt, the golden calf and the various rebellions. He did this on behalf of them, of Israel—He did this as Israel. So when God looks upon the likes of Moses and Aaron, Caleb and Joshua and other repentant sinners in the Exodus, He says, “I see you made that journey perfectly, because My Son did it for you.” Last week, you heard of Jesus’ baptism and what it means: in His baptism, Jesus was declared to be Israel. He emerged from the waters bearing all the sins of world, including all the sins of Israel. He carried them to the cross, and there God punished Him for all sin, including all the sins of Israel.
So when God looks upon His repentant people, He says, “I’ve already condemned your sin in My Son, so now I forgive you.”

Jesus is all of Israel reduced to one man, which is really Good News if you’re part of Israel. Rejoice, for you are! That’s the next declaration in our text: The LORD declares to the Servant, “It is too light a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make You as a light for the nations, that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” Now that the LORD has declared that the Servant is Israel, He makes clear that the Servant isn’t just here to redeem those who are related to Abraham by blood. As we know from elsewhere in Scripture, the true Israel is not those who share Abraham’s bloodline, but who share his faith—who trust that the Servant is their Redeemer. So the Good News is for those who live at the end of the earth—even the intermountain West.

And finally the LORD declares, "Kings shall see and arise; princes, and they shall prostrate themselves; because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen You.” Kings and rulers use swords and spears and tanks and guns and RPGs. What match is a Servant of rulers, armed only with His Word to speak? Answer: He’s the victor. Rulers will bow down to Him, either in faith or in fear.” The Servant rules over all, which is why you can be sure that nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

From start to finish, this joyous Servant Song is all about Jesus. Once again, you see that the Savior is at the heart of Scripture throughout. I’ve left out two bits, though: so far, I’ve left out the “clunkers”—the less-than-joyous verses. They make up a small part, but they stand out.

In the midst of all of the LORD’s promises of help and strength and victory for the Servant, the Servant responds; and He says, “I have labored in vain; I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity.” That verse sort of hits like a slap in the face. It sounds as if the Servant is admitting failure, as if Jesus is saying, “I gave it My best, but I couldn’t get the job done.” That isn’t what He’s saying, though. He’s actually affirming that salvation is solely and completely a gift, with no strings attached: so even when He gives the gift of salvation, it doesn’t mean that sinners will gladly receive it or hold onto it. Many reject Jesus and His grace, so it often looks like He’s accomplishing nothing.

Just look at His public ministry on the way to the cross. He is there, first and foremost, to redeem Israel—remember, He’s Israel to make up for the sins of Israel by His life and by His death. If anyone should know the Old Testament and know what the Messiah does, it should be His fellow countrymen. But instead, He’s largely rejected—eventually betrayed and crucified. Shortly before He dies, remember that He weeps over Jerusalem and says, “How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Matthew 23:37). It is not that the Lord has failed: He has warned against sin and offered salvation perfectly, but nearly everybody in Jerusalem refuses the gift. It looks like it’s all in vain.

Then it gets worse! What does the LORD call the Servant at the end of the reading? He calls Him “deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the Servant of rulers.” There’s Jesus in His Passion, deeply despised, rejected, submitting to the death sentence handed down by sinful authorities.

It is never more than at the cross that it looks like everything the Servant does has all been for nothing.

And yet—as you well know, it is at that very cross that the Servant completes His work,
defeats sin and death so that His salvation might reach to all the end of the earth. Appearances are deceiving: the Lord is at work. That’s why Jesus isn’t just the Servant in Isaiah: He’s the suffering Servant. The One who is Israel-boiled-down-to-one suffers God’s wrath to save all who believe.

II. Living By Faith

When Martin Luther comments on this Servant Song, he gets to verse 4 where the Servant says, “I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;” and he says, “This is the lament of every preacher.” There is some truth to that: the task of pastors is to wade into all sorts of situations and speak God’s Word. God’s Word imparts faith and strengthens faith. It gives forgiveness and salvation. But we can’t see any of those things. We see tears and worry lines. We see hospital beds and weakening bodies. We see a fair number of caskets. The whole time, it’s given to us to keep speaking God’s Word even when it looks like it’s for nothing. This is why, by the way, mental health experts advise that a pastor should have a hobby—like woodworking—that creates something, so that he can see some sort of accomplishment. It’s also why pastors are tempted to slip into a funk, survey their ministry and say, “I have labored in vain.”

It’s also why it’s been so difficult for the Church when people have measured the success of pastors by visible accomplishments, like how much a congregation has increased or decreased in size. If a pastor is faithfully speaking the Word of God, he is doing what God has given him to do; and a congregation needs to trust that the Lord is at work in that Word, no matter the measurables, and not conclude that the labor is in vain.

There’s no need to dwell on this for our sake here: we’re very blessed in all sorts of ways at Good Shepherd. I mention it because it’s an evident example of the temptation for every Christian. One of the devil’s greatest and ongoing attacks upon you is to convince you that hearing the Word of God will make no difference for you. That’s why you get those thoughts in your mind like, “Why should I go to church frequently? It won’t make a difference if I skip a Sunday,” which is to say “I would accomplish nothing by going to church;” which is to say, “If I went to church, God wouldn’t accomplish anything with His Word on me today.”

It’s why you get thoughts in your mind like, “Why should I continue to speak God’s Word to my friends or family or kids who have left the faith? They’re set in their ways, and I’m not going to change their minds.” This is to give into the temptation and say, “To speak God’s Word is to labor in vain, because I don’t really believe that God’s Word changes hearts.”

It’s why it’s easy to figure out ways to avoid personal daily Bible reading and prayer, or family devotions. You’re tempted to see it only as a good discipline in which you remind yourself of how you should act toward God, not a time in which the Lord works through His Word to strengthen your faith. If you’ve reduced the reading of God’s Word down to something you do to discipline you, then you’re not trusting that the Lord is at work; and you’re eventually going to conclude, “I have spent this time for nothing and vanity.”

And when something very bad happens, it’s why it’s so easy to think, “This faith in Jesus has no benefit. I have labored in vain at being a Christian. I have spent my strength for nothing and for vanity.”

All such thoughts, of course, mean that you’re not living by faith as you ought to be, for faith trusts in what it doesn’t see, often in spite of what it does. You have a couple of paths to take at that point: one of those is to get angry at God that faith is in things unseen, which is kind of like getting angry at God that water is colorless. In other words, the problem is not that God’s plan is bad, but that you want God to do things your way. This path leads away from eternal life.
The other path is the way of the Suffering Servant. It is to live by faith. It is to acknowledge your sin before God, and to trust His Word that He forgives you even if you have trouble forgiving yourself. It’s trusting His Word that He favors you despite what you often see or feel, that He was despised and abhorred on the cross so that God would not despise you. It is to live as one set free in Christ, even when by all appearances you are still subject to sin and death. It is to see death coming and trust that for Jesus’ sake you are going to live forever.

Difficult? Nah: it’s impossible. Impossible for you, but not for God. You’re saved by grace through faith, not by how perfectly you trust. Remember how Jesus was made Israel, to do what Israel could not? He was made Israel to do what you couldn’t do too: He lived perfectly, died for your sin, rose again and never once stopped trusting His Father’s Word—even when the nails were driven home. And with that forgiveness, He gives you credit not just for His perfect works and perfect living, but for His perfect believing. Though you’ll be assailed with doubt as long as you’re in this sinful world, the Lord looks upon you and sees faith, because the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses all sin, doubts included.

It is not an easy thing to live by faith: not just because you cannot see what you believe in, but because the devil works so hard to get you to doubt what you cannot see. But by the Word of God, you know that the Servant has come and suffered to deliver you. He has made His salvation known to the ends of the earth so that you might be His people. His cross may have looked like nothing and vanity, but there He won your salvation.

It’s as sure as His Word, the same Word which so surely proclaims that you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen