

Isaiah 49:1-6

Listen to me, O coastlands,  
*(islands, faraway lands, ends of the earth)*  
pay attention, you peoples from far away!  
The Lord called me before I was born,  
*(like Jeremiah)*  
while I was in my mother's womb he named me.

He made my mouth like a sharp sword,  
*Not just any sword*  
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;  
he made me a *polished* arrow,  
*Not just any arrow. . .*  
in his quiver he hid me away.  
*These weapons are well maintained*

And *he said* to me,  
**"You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified."**  
*Here is the probable understanding that Israel is the servant of the Lord .*

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."  
*Despite the fact that my life adds up to very little, I will trust in God.*

And now *the Lord* says,  
*We have traveled from then until NOW.*  
(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--)  
*This verse sounds creedal.*

*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,  
*God shoots the arrow. . .*

that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

**Boom!**

CALL-- HISTORY the dynamics (GPC???)

CALL IS DIALOGUE (whether it be out loud or internal; whether a “voice” is heard or one feels a sense of the dialogue)

The usual response-- “I’m not worthy, get somebody else.” “I have issues, limitations, and did I say, I’m not worthy?”

“Isaiah” was reluctant but if we follow the text carefully, we find that the prophet was well groomed:

1. He was called before he was born, he was given substantial gifts (e.g. His mouth was not just a sword; it was a sharp sword.
2. He was not made to be a mere arrow, but a polished arrow, carefully prepared and maintained.
3. Plus there was the idea that God placed a protective screen around Isaiah, “in his quiver he hid me away...”

And from what we know of these metaphors and from what we know of ancient Jewish prophetic tradition, Isaiah had been called to go and to do damage to a status quo at a time just prior to the release of the captives from Babylon; just before Cyrus conquered Babylon and gave the Jews permission to return to the Promised Land. (Which was a really big deal!)

But at the time, I’m guessing that the Jewish community in exile in Babylon had come to grips with their situation-- after all; they’d been there nearly fifty years. They had grown comfortable. Fewer and fewer people were around who had actually been in Jerusalem on that terrible day when the Babylonians breached the walls of the city.

Isaiah, if he were to go would need to be sharp. A dull or rusty sword or a poorly maintained arrow would have been useless. And he needed God’s protection as he grew, because he had an important message to deliver-- which we will arrive at presently.

Call is something that we ministers like to talk about, because we are told, and we believe that we are called by God. And if we were not carefully listening, we might conclude that ministers are the only people God calls.

We’ll listen carefully because I have some bad news for you that is really good news.

If you ever believed that, prepare to be unencumbered! Isaiah is only special because of his time and his task, and because of the relevancy of that task for today.

I believe that every one of us has been called, like Isaiah, at a particular time for a particular task. And the closer we get to the understanding of our times and of the tasks

set before us, the more likely we are to respond like Isaiah did; like Isaiah, and nearly everybody else in the Bible for whom there is a particular call from God.

God calls us and the usual response is: "Lord, you cannot be serious, find somebody else."

Isaiah is no different, despite his recognition of God's role in his life, he responded, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity." "C'mon God, I've wasted my time, my life; you must have made a mistake, you must have meant for some other Isaiah to go..."

But in a dramatic turnabout, the fledgling prophet reflected that, "surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God." He *could* trust God, because he always had, despite his wasted life.

But God's call is hard. I don't know about you, but I've had a lot of time to think about it. I go to presbytery meetings and watch as another lamb is led to the slaughter. Another candidate is grilled in preparation for ordination. Another young man or woman is asked by members of yet another presbytery about what he or she believes that call means, while seasoned ministers and lay leaders sit in the pews grateful that they have either gotten past that, or don't have to worry about it-- except that we all do.

You and I must consider our calling or are we self-condemned-- like Isaiah-- in the belief that we have wasted our lives.

Also like Isaiah we can find ourselves believing to be called and pursue the wrong call. Isaiah thought his job was to lead Israel back to God. We can imagine how far they had drifted after living all those years in Babylon, trying to make a living, trying to succeed, trying to fit in; like the immigrants coming to this country, wishing to hold on to the customs of Lithuania, or Sicily, Morocco or Japan, and finding in their children the wish to be simply American. But Isaiah was given a different calling. Far more difficult than merely leading Israel back to God-- if you can imagine such a thing.

Isaiah began to understand that his understanding of call was too easy, and that his task was to present a radically new idea to the Jews. In many ways this idea is not difficult for us to swallow, we've heard it enough in the teachings of Jesus and the writings of Paul, but to Isaiah's contemporaries, let's just say that what he realized was his true calling was far more frightening than anything anybody else had ever done in the name of God.

Listen again,

**And now *the Lord* 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.”

God was swinging the sharp sword. God was loosing the polished arrow. The protective quiver had dissolved. God was aiming to kill the status quo, and introduce a bright new sense of himself that included everybody! Imagine how that flew in the Jewish community in exile in and around Babylon-- like a concrete duck! The idea soared like a granite goose or an asphalt albatross!

A light to the nations? As in nations plural? This is a major departure from official Judaism. Are the people God called willing to give up their unique understanding of their relationship with Jahweh? Is the Promised Land no longer promised? Or had the whole world-- all the nations become the promised land?

We think about this apparent inclusive policy from above during the time of the prophet and wonder what does any of this have to do with us? I believe that God is greater than our understanding and expectations and we must be careful when we speak of God lest we find ourselves limiting God-- and maybe that's our problem, yours and mine because it seems that the extension of God's message to the prophet is that God is the God of all people and creatures everywhere and at every time.

And so we cannot place God in any sort of spiritual container and claim that God is Jewish or Christian or any other religion. God will not be boxed up and wrapped with a bow-- no not even at Christmas time. And this leads in a variety of directions which I will leave for you to ponder for yourselves.

Just remember that these words are based as faithfully as I could write them on the text of Isaiah 49:1-6, and I leave you those words to lock into your hearts and consider. Think of it as your homework.

What is the significance of detonating a cherished belief and practice in the face of revelation?