

Second Sunday after the Epiphany
January 19, 2020
Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Isaiah 49:1-7 Listen to me, you islands;
hear this, you distant nations:
Before I was born the Lord called me;
from my mother's womb he has spoken my name.
2 He made my mouth like a sharpened sword,
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me into a polished arrow
and concealed me in his quiver.
3 He said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will display my splendor."
4 But I said, "I have labored in vain;
I have spent my strength for nothing at all.
Yet what is due me is in the Lord's hand,
and my reward is with my God."
5 And now the Lord says—
he who formed me in the womb to be his servant
to bring Jacob back to him
and gather Israel to himself,
for I am[a] honored in the eyes of the Lord
and my God has been my strength—
6 he says:
"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."
7 This is what the Lord says—
the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel—
to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation,
to the servant of rulers:
"Kings will see you and stand up,
princes will see and bow down,
because of the Lord, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

"Messiah's Monumental Mission"

Coming back from the doctor's office, they couldn't help but gush with excitement. It was just a normal pregnancy check up with an initial ultrasound, but these first time parents couldn't stop planning and looking into the future. This child would have every opportunity. Everything in their lives would be reorganized to maximize the health and happiness of this

new blessing. But what would she be like? Would she be tall and gentle like dad or have the same fiery personality as mom? She could grow up to be a doctor or an Olympic track athlete. Maybe she would take Silicon Valley's innovations and apply them to global issues like childhood poverty in developing nations. Maybe she would be the one to discover a cure for cancer or a way to overcome diabetes. Yes, the proud expecting parents were sure their unborn child would do something huge, accomplish something monumental.

Sounds arrogant, presumptuous when coming from the mouths of parents or a coaching making a pregame press conference prediction. Yet that's what God's Servant acknowledges about himself and his life purpose. God has big things in store for his Servant, great plans, a monumental mission.

In Isaiah 49 Jesus is given the voice of the prophet Isaiah centuries before his own birth. We get a glimpse into God's plan for sending his promised Savior, what the plan had always been since the first fall into sin. These verses are good news for people like us who are too busy just keeping our heads above water to make plans, or get so discouraged when it seems impossible to accomplish anything more than the most modest plans or we get frustrated when we can't see any results from all our hard work. Jesus has a huge mission to carry out. And he is equipped and qualified to do monumentally more than what we might expect. Then Jesus works in you and me to make us his mission partners motivated by his monumental mission.

1) Set apart and equipped

Last week we heard about God's plans for his Servant. And we heard how God's Servant would eagerly and willingly carry out those plans. In Isaiah 49 we get what is known as the second of those Servant Songs. And when Isaiah delivered this message to God's people, things were pretty rough in Israel. The nation's power was on the decline. Major empires were expanding in power. Dark threats were looming on the horizon. And after that wave of violence and oppression, even darker days would follow.

So God's Servant tells God's faithful people: **"Before I was born the Lord called me; from my mother's womb he has spoken my name."** (Isaiah 49:1) Deliverance will come from God's hand. But that deliverance might not take the shape God's people expected. God's Servant gives a clarification: **"He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver."** (Isaiah 49:2) God's Servant will have a prophetic mission. God would prepare his Servant to speak and deliver God's message. God's power and authority packaged in the person of the Messiah would stay concealed until just the right time, until God was ready to carry out his ultimate purposes through the Messiah.

2) Discouragement

Here's the tricky, maybe surprising part about all this. God had called and appointed Jesus to be his Servant. Jesus the Messiah understood his life's purpose very clearly and carried out that mission precisely. But the Messiah wasn't very successful. At least through the prophet voice of Isaiah he says: **"I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing at all."** (Isaiah 49:4) That's hard to wrestle with when we realize Jesus is saying

those words. But maybe it shouldn't really surprise us. In the first chapter of John's Gospel we get an introduction to the ministry of Jesus: **"He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him."** (John 1:10,11) We know Jesus never gave up, because he never committed a sin. But in his humiliation, putting aside all his divine power and glory, it sure seemed to him that he wasn't getting a favorable response to all his favorable work.

I had a conversation this past week with a fellow pastor. He had spent an hour on the phone the previous night with pastor who had checked out. Not suicidal. Just going through the motions. Just had gotten so disillusioned and lost his passion for ministry that he was just doing enough to get by. You probably know someone like that. Just does enough not to get noticed or written up by her supervisor. But doesn't really take any pride in her work or show any kind of ambition to do more than the bare minimum.

Did you know Martin Luther gave up preaching? Their situation was a little different in those days. They had some sort of church service every day and multiple different services on Sundays. So, for example, Luther preached almost 200 times in 1528. But then at the beginning of 1530, he just quit. What had happened? It's simple. He just became totally discouraged, in spite of what he had advised others. In 1529 he had warned the congregation several times that he would stop preaching unless there were more fruit of the gospel among them. Obviously, Luther was angry. But above all he was disillusioned. (Meuser, p. 29, 30)

If you stuck around after church last week you heard a little about our ministry plan. We want to reduce our subsidy from synod from its current \$65,000 each year to zero in 6 years. We want to have 100 people in worship each week by that time as well. We want to be a church known and recognized in our community. Does that seem a little bit out of reach? Does it seem too big? Especially when you think about all the work you already do for your church? When you think about all the time and effort you exert for God and haven't been able to witness real impressive results yet.

Even in your personal life, you might not have reasons for confidence. Some days it seems like you can barely do anything more than just take care of work and family responsibilities. Some weeks you are just reacting to all everything that's going on, trying to hold your head above water. You would love to spend more energy on God's bigger mission for you, but any additional responsibilities would feel like a monumental burden on your already maxed out schedule.

3) Even better, even more

Frustrations pop up when we are in the middle of disappointing work. The problem is, we get so focused on what is going on right now, the responses we are getting immediately, we lose sight of the big picture. That little girl from proud expectant parents could grow up to be a world class medical researcher. She could get caught up in the general population's reluctance to follow CDC guidelines and forget about her work to cure cancer. A coach may get so upset about the mental mistakes made by his team in the first half that he forgets to

give them an inspiring half time speech to mount a surprising comeback and finish the game strong.

The Lord wants all God's servants to know his big picture plans for his Messiah Servant. Yes, things don't always turn out the way we want. But that doesn't stop God's plans. The Lord reveals this monumental mission for Messiah: **"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."** (Isaiah 49:6) Merely defeating foreign powers was too small. Restoring Israel back to prominence was too modest. Jesus comes to be the Savior of all people. Jesus brings salvation to the ends of the earth.

When the angel Gabriel announced the birth of Jesus, he told Mary: **"You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David... his kingdom will never end."** (Luke 1:31-33) The work predicted to Joseph by the angel was clear: **"She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, [f] because he will save his people from their sins."** (Matthew 1:21) Now John the Baptist makes clear this monumental mission to curious onlookers: **"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"** (John 1:29) Rescuing one group of people would be too insignificant for God's Servant. Jesus came for all people who feel like life is just too much. Jesus came to rescue everyone who has checked out of serving God. Jesus lived a perfectly flawless life for people whose disappointment causes them to quit. The burden Jesus bore was the service that we shrug off our shoulders. Jesus carried out the monumental mission set down for the promised Messiah. His work makes a monumental difference for a world incapable of rescuing itself.

4) Monumental motivation

Martin Luther climbed back into the pulpit without some huge dramatic transformation. Why? He just realized the one thing those hearts needed was God's Word. People didn't always respond and demonstrate the fruit God was after. But God has given us no other way, no alternate method of changing hearts other than proclaiming the good news of what Jesus has done for our world.

Our congregation can focus what we can do right now. You might not be able to get our congregation to financial independence by writing one check. But God's people can challenge themselves to give first fruits generously and sacrificially. If your fixed income would make a 10% offering too challenging, raise your gifts by 10% gradually until you get there. You can't get our worship attendance to 100 over night. But you can invite one person each week. You might not be able to give our church an identity in our community. But you know why you are here. You know what makes coming here necessary for your spiritual life. You know what sets apart the message and ministry of Christ the Rock in your life. What is one thing I can do today that will make a difference over the course of the entire year? Mission is always better together. It's not just about better numbers for finances or increased attendance. We work better when we are working together. We are more motivated when we know we are part of a team.

Even God's Servant didn't get to see instantaneous positive feedback. But Jesus stayed focused on the work set out for him. Yet God's Messiah worked to serve the Lord faithfully regardless of visible results: **"Yet what is due me is in the Lord's hand, and my reward is with my God."** (Isaiah 49:4b) Jesus concentrated on his monumental mission and left the outcome of his work in the hands of the Lord. He had confidence God would not forsake him, but bring about the necessary results. Jesus served faithfully even when the religious leaders rejected him and the Jerusalem rabble ridiculed him. He finished his work with the confidence God would bring about his results.

Monuments tend to be large and imposing. But they can also fill you with pride and confidence. If you visit the 9/11 Monument in New York City it can take your breathe away. But it can also remind you that terrorists will not get the last word. Evil will not intimidate us. If you visit the Code Talkers Veterans Memorial and be filled with awe at the determination and unique talents that gave the U.S. military a strategic advantage in World War II. But it can inspire you to use your unique gifts and abilities to tackle a seemingly impossible mission.

The work accomplished by Messiah Jesus is truly monumental. It is large enough to impact the entire earth. But is is also motivating. Mission accomplished, mission continuing. The Messiah accomplished his mission, now continues his mission through you. Before you were born your parents may not have made bold predictions about your path through life. They may have just hoped you were healthy and they were able to give you a good home. But God accomplished a monumental mission through his promised Messiah. And now God is doing amazing things through his servants today. Amen.