

Is 49:1-7
16 January 2011

“To be Light”

“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.” That’s what we hear in verse 6 of our Old Testament reading. It is too **light** that you restore Israel. No, you will be a **light** to the nations.

By emphasizing the repeated word “light,” I’m not suggesting that it’s a pun. The Hebrew words are different and unrelated to each other. “Light” is only repeated in some English translations. But this task, which appears in this, the second Servant Song in Isaiah, represents a dramatic expansion. No longer is it fine to just focus on your own people; no, you need to be concerned about the whole world.

Last week, when I preached on the first Servant Song, I mentioned some theories as to who the Servant might be. The primary candidates include the prophet himself, Israel, and Jesus. Some also suggest that the Servant is symbolic; the Servant is an ideal figure. A good case can be made for any of them.

However, I didn’t talk about **when** these songs emerged. They’re in the part of the book that begins with chapter 40. This last part of the book is often called “Deutero-Isaiah,” or “Second Isaiah,” because it comes from a time about 200 years after the 8th century prophet we know as Isaiah. (I hasten to add: not everyone agrees with this viewpoint!)

Deutero-Isaiah, and the Servant Songs that it contains, comes from the late 6th century. By this time, the Jewish exile in Babylon is decades old. Some scholars call chapters 56-66 of the book “Third Isaiah,” reflecting an even later time, after the Persians have overthrown the Babylonians. Stay with me; there is a point to all of this talk about “when,” and here it is.

The Servant Songs are directed to a people—the Jews—who have been exiled for a long time, a people thoroughly beaten down. The prophet in Deutero-Isaiah is telling the people that their days of misery are numbered. Having said that, as they would later find out, it’s not like exchanging the Persians for the Babylonians means the end of trouble. Still, as we’ve heard, the people have a mission; they have work to do, namely, to be a light to the nations.

The message of the Servant of the Lord has relevance for us today—and tomorrow. That’s when we observe the birthday of **another** servant of the Lord, a 20th century prophet, Martin Luther King, Jr. Like the Servant of Isaiah 49, King realized the words of verse 6 in his own life. He was called to move beyond the confines of his own conquered and exiled people to be a light to the nations. We can see him wrestling with this in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”¹

In April 1963, King participated in a demonstration in Birmingham, Alabama, where he was arrested. Several local clergy ran an article in the newspaper in which they expressed sympathy with King’s efforts, but they called them “unwise and

¹ mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/resources/article/annotated_letter_from_birmingham

untimely.” In a document that remains one of the key statements of the civil rights movement, Dr. King made his response.

To the charge that, not being a Birmingham resident, he shouldn't concern himself with what goes on there, he replied, “I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

In verse 7 of our reading, the Servant of the Lord must face the consequences for calling the people to a greater level of awareness and concern. God refers to the Servant as “one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers.” But as always, God is merciful and makes the promise: “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.”

Martin Luther King also understood that there was a price to pay. “As in so many past experiences, our hopes had been blasted, and the shadow of deep disappointment settled upon us,” he wrote from his jail cell. “We had no alternative except to prepare for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and the national community. Mindful of the difficulties involved, we decided to undertake a process of self-purification. We began a series of workshops on nonviolence, and we repeatedly asked ourselves: ‘Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?’ ‘Are you able to endure the ordeal of jail?’”

I admire Dr. King for his courage. Extremely few and far between are leaders, of any community or government, who display that level of bravery and wisdom. To stand up to injustice—and to do so nonviolently, regardless of provocation—requires a profound spiritual maturity.

To be light. There is the tension between light and dark. Some of that's part of what I've already talked about—being a light to the nations.

But there is also the tension between light and heavy. The Servant speaks to that in verse 4 (GNB): “I said, ‘I have worked, but how hopeless it is! I have used up my strength, but have accomplished nothing.’” Can any of us relate to that heaviness of spirit? Still, the Servant doesn't give up. “Yet I can trust the Lord to defend my cause; he will reward me for what I do.” There is the assurance that being committed to bringing the light of the Lord will somehow work out.

The problem is that we too often try to bring our **own** light. In bringing our own light, it too often winds up being more **heat** than **light**.

A perfect illustration of this was Tucson, a week ago yesterday: the mass murder and the attempted assassination of Gabrielle Giffords. It was an occasion for plenty of people to radiate a lot of heat, but not much light. Within a couple of hours, there was already a firestorm of speculation about the motives of the shooter. Many were attempting to draw a straight line from him to politicians and media personalities who make incendiary, and often irresponsible, comments.

Clearly, the shooter and any possible accomplices must answer for their own actions. Still, that goes for the rest of us. I don't know how much this affected the incident in Tucson, but we shouldn't **pretend** that our words and deeds don't have consequences, especially those of us in positions of influence and those who have large

audiences. We are accountable for what we say. Can we learn to use words that help bring more light and less heat?

Wait! I think I know what's going on. The answer is in today's scripture reading. In verse 2 it says, "He made my mouth like a sharp sword." A sword? Well, that can only mean one thing—no doubt about it! We are to make sure our words are used to hurt and kill each other!

Martin Luther King was **lambasted** for not showing enough heat. His discipline of nonviolence drew fire from those who saw it as a sign of weakness. It really is a sad irony that the assassination of a man whose life was about peace resulted in the fury of riots across America. In that regard, he joined a long line of servants of the Lord whose stand for peace and justice led them to a violent end.

To be light. I must confess that I struggle with the temptation, as I mentioned earlier, to bring my **own** light, without regard for the light of the Lord—without regard for what the Spirit is saying. Sometimes I just **know** I'm right, and I don't hesitate to let the words fly without **thinking** first!

I don't suppose any of you have ever let this get out of control, but knowing you're right can be a heavy thing to carry around. The epistle of James says that "no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison" (3:8). I don't want to contribute to the venomous nature of our environment.

But guess what? We need not take that poison pill, when we can follow the example of the Servant of the Lord; we can allow Jesus to guide us. As Paul tells the Corinthians in our epistle reading: "in every way you have been enriched in [Christ], in speech and knowledge of every kind—just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you" (1 Co 1:5-6). He continues, "He will also strengthen you to the end" (v. 8).

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus speaks of "false prophets [who] will arise and lead many astray." I don't believe we're **ever** in short supply of false prophets. He adds that "because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold" (24:11-12). The love of many will grow cold. This lawlessness is not just acts against the law, but it is lawlessness of the heart, which tries to instill in us a hopelessness of even trying to follow the Christ, thus pushing more and more against the law of love.

If we allow our love to grow cold, then there's no way we can be a light to the world. We quench the light in the world, the world that exists within each of us. Our gifts of speech and knowledge ebb, and the flame inside begins to smolder. But remember last week: the Servant will not put out the most dimly glowing spark.

So may our speech and knowledge to be a testimony of light to the nations. To be a servant of the Lord, to be light, we allow the light of love inside keep burning.