

Isaiah 49:1-7

Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away!
The LORD called me before I was born; while I was in my mother's womb God named me. God made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of God's hand I was hid. God made me a polished arrow; in a quiver I was hid away.
And God said to me, 'You are my servant in whom I will be glorified.'

But I said, 'I have laboured 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.' And now the LORD says, who formed me in the womb to be a Divine servant, to bring Jacob back, and that Israel might be gathered to the LORD, for I am honoured in the sight of the LORD, and my God has become my strength—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.' Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and its 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.'

First Corinthians 1:1-9

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Calls and Echoes

It is difficult for me to hear this scripture passage read and not think of Jesus. God tells this “servant” of Isaiah 49 that it was in the womb that they were named--almost like the angel Gabriel in Luke’s gospel telling Mary that the child within her will be named Jesus. Or I think of the magi of Matthew’s gospel kneeling, which this kneeling business in Greek is linguistically same word family for “prostrate” which we find in Isaiah 49 (προσκυνήσουσιν) or worship elsewhere in the N.T. I hear the words “Holy One of Israel” and I am drawn to Mark 1:24 in which a Spirit identifies Jesus as the “Holy One of God”. I suspect the authors of our New Testament knew of Isaiah 49, or God knew, even as events unfolded and ink quills were put text to parchment. God’s call: it is present in the text and our lives.

The idea of God’s call, which appears in Isaiah 49, is implicit in John’s account of the baptism of Jesus as well as the invitation Jesus offers two would-be disciples to “come and see” (John 1:33, 39)—a lectionary text of the day not read. In First Corinthians 1, both Paul and the congregation have been called. Again, Divine servants being called seems to be a recurring theme within our texts for the day. Within our sacred texts there are calls and echoes of calls.

I have touched briefly upon some of the rich biblical studies present within the small part of Isaiah 49 which Tammy read earlier, so maybe it is time for a story. Way back in 2022, December 18 in fact, Ella Ens Funk chose to receive baptism. It wasn’t the baptism of Jesus, but it is the first baptism we have had at NPMC since the pandemic started which is significant. And I found it very meaningful.

The call of God seemed very present in Ella’s life leading her to the decision to set out formally on the Jesus Way.¹ Part of her decision was linked to the intentional manner in which her family, the friends of her family, and this congregation as a whole have sought to live. A certain ethic, it might be said, has left an impression upon her; God’s people testifying through actions and attitudes as much as speaking or preaching.

A part of her decision was a reflection of the unconditional love of God, mediated through various sources, which she has come to own. The decision to be baptized was hers, but the calling of God preceded that event. We have sought to live into our call which echoed into Ella’s life as a call. At least that was my take.

As I was listening that day, I found myself remembering again some of my own journey. It was primarily my family and faith community which shaped my values and those virtues by which I wished to live. There were various moments of grace which convinced me of God’s abiding presence among us and God’s

¹ Ella’s words can be referenced on the NPMC web site, sermon section, year 2022, December 18.

unconditional love. As Bob extended to Ella the right hand of fellowship and people of the congregation greeted Ella following the service, I was reminded of my baptism after which I was greeted by people of the congregation. There were echoes happening for me internally even as Ella's new chapter was beginning.

Sometimes the stories taking shape before us are rooted in the past and simultaneously point us to the future. Church rituals can do this for us if we allow it to happen. As we live the rituals of the church year after year we are invited to remember again the past and the future. It is a grounding spiritual discipline.

The music of the morning was largely selected by Ella—hymns that have been and are important for her. This takes me back to a look at our scriptures.

Within Isaiah 49:1-7 is named as a servant song; even though there is no reference to songs in this short passage, but it is a bit further down the text. Verse 13 says "Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing!". Psalm 40:3, also a lectionary text for today, speaks of a "new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God". Linguistically Isaiah 49 and 42 (also a servant song the professors suggest) are linked. Both speak of a "servant" (Is 42:1 // Is 49:3) being a "light to the nations (Is 42:6 // Is 49:6), and in both passages we have a song being sung (Is 42:10 // Is 49:13). Later in 1st Corinthians (Ch 14:15), Paul makes reference to singing with the spirit and the mind. In this respect, we have songs connected to three of our four lectionary texts. And they all highlight calling and being God's servants, and also hardship while living the calling and being a servant. Interesting.

The songs this morning were chosen with great care. Three of the five songs deliberately reference biblical stories, one is a scriptural benediction, and one is rich with Mennonite history. "I Love to Tell the Story" reflects song writer Catherine Hankey's experience of the power of music to stabilize a hurting soul. "Arabella Catherine Hankey...wrote these lines during a lengthy convalescences following a serious illness. They are taken from a long poem about the life of Jesus, written in two parts."² When a person is in recovery, focusing on the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus—as well as longed for recovery—things change. She chose to let old stories shape her current story. We can not call it a Servant Song, but it has served servants for many decades. Servant songs help us.

I had a high school classmate who signed up with MCC service in Iraq for five years in the midst of the gulf wars. She was one of the brightest and best of our graduating class; and probably one of the most pious. The war zone experience left her physically, emotionally, and spiritually shattered. She was in

² *Hymnal Companion*, Joan A. Fyock writer and Lani Wright editor (Faith and Life Press: Newton, KS: 1996), p. 157.

recovery mode when she got back. She listened to Andrew Lloyd Weber’s “Pie Jesu” over and over again. It stabilized her. Knowing her and knowing some of her experiences, I am deeply moved every time I hear this piece of music. Servant songs come in many forms. Hear now a recording of “Pie Jesu (Charlotte Church).³

Slide / Song: Pie Jesu

For those who feel as if they have spent for nothing and vanity, to use the language of the servant from Psalm 49, it is a song of balm. Loosely translated it goes, “merciful Jesus merciful Jesus, who takes away the sins of the world, grant them rest everlasting. Lamb of God lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, grant them rest everlasting”. What are the songs which sustain us? We hear calls and echoes of call through song.

I will go into detail about one other hymn history from this morning a bit later. All the hymns this morning, though, reference biblical stories full of calling, restoration, and direction. If we know our biblical stories, we will be reminded and inspired and edified by them all the more as we listen to or sing the hymns of our faith. In short, songs heal the souls of servants and equip us for continued ministry in our homes, communities and places of work. As a bridge from this section to the next, I share that Isaiah 49 is part of a group of texts from this section of Isaiah known as the Servant Songs.⁴ Songs and servants-- let us turn to servants.

Who is this servant mentioned in the Isaiah songs? Some translations of Isaiah 49:1-7 list “Israel” as the servant, but this makes no sense with the rest of the passage which lead many scholars, a rare super-majority in fact, to believe that this was an intentional typo by the copy staff when they converted the Hebrew bible (which does not list Israel) to Greek.⁵ In the Hebrew text it seems God’s servants might extend beyond Israel. And this makes sense when a person reads Isaiah in its totality.

Back in chapter 45:1 Cyrus is listed as an anointed, a messiah, one who delivers. In John 1 disciples who have been called to “come and see” describe Jesus as “the messiah”. Translating from Greek to Hebrew, Jesus would be rendered as Joshua (the same as Cyrus)—the one who delivered the people of God from the wilderness to the Promised Land. The presence of non-believing persons in the Old Testament like emperors Cyrus and Darius who are unwitting

³ [Charlotte Church - Pie Jesu \(Live From Brixton Academy\) - YouTube](#)

⁴ R.N. Whybray, *The Second Isaiah* in the “Old Testament Guides series (Sheffield Academic Press: Sheffield, England, 1995), pp. 66-68.

⁵ *Ibid*, 65-67.

instruments of God's plans raises the question of the parameters to which servanthood to God extends.

In the context of this section of Isaiah, I quote biblical commentators of the NRSV. "Although God loves to use [the chosen] people to do [Divine work], God also uses some unlikely figures. Two pagan rulers of Persia took active roles in furthering the national life of Israel...Cyrus, as king of Persia, decreed that all people who had been deported from other lands were free to return to their homelands" and Darius helped finance the rebuilding of a temple. "God not only used these rulers; he said of Cyrus, "He is my shepherd, and he shall carry out all my purpose" (Isaiah 44:28).⁶ And this is not the only time the Bible references a servant of God who is an unbeliever, by some definitions, to further the Divine project. It seems God works with the willing. A few questions come to my mind as I consider this reality:

- When has God used someone in a significant way in your life who was not committed to your definition of God?
- Are we willing [as the O.T. writers were], to credit God's sovereign movements among both those who meet regularly for Christian worship and those who don't?⁷ Movements among people who might even make a sacrifice to an "unknown god", as Acts names it?.

On the back of these questions, I offer a story (in conclusion) which links together this intriguing servant question of biblical studies with song. "Heart with Loving Heart United" has an intriguing history. It is a type of Servant Song.

Nicolaus Ludwig Von Zinzendorf was a wealthy man; he was the text writer of the hymn "Heart with Loving Heart" (VT 813). He wanted to be a minister, but alas that is not always the fate of those with family commitments or business prospects. He was a confessed Christian, and he had a sensitivity to the Christians who identified differently from his brand. He created space in his space for persecuted Christians of Anabaptist descent to live. The Moravians survived, barely. Count Zinzendorf exhausted his estate on hosting these Moravians and additional refuges as well as financing other Christian ministry. It was Moravians, through the generational gift of Count Zinzendorf, which allowed the current Pleasant Point church to be built. It was a Moravians that contributed greatly to a church I served previously in Minneapolis who saw in that congregation something akin to Moravian. The Servant Songs reverberate,

In this Province and among this people, we should neither lose sight of the translator of this text of Hear With Loving Heart United. It is none other than

⁶ *The Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, edited by Richard J. Foster (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 2005), p. 1045.

⁷ Ibid.

Walter Klaassen who was raised in the Eigenheim Mennonite Church, who has taught in our Mennonite schools, who has represented Mennonites in the ecumenical world, who is relative to a number within this congregation. Moravians, Mennonites and Servant Songs--- we do not know the echoes of the calls we hear and to which we respond.

Moravian, Mennonite, Coptic, other gradation of Christian: We are not united because we love each other. We are not united because of blood lines. We are not united on account of professional status. We are united on the foundation of Jesus Christ who calls sinners and saints and atheists and agnostics to join his discipleship crew. I don't know how, but the story continues. May it continue in us, our children, our grand-children, and all we hold dear. We will now sing together #761 VT "I Love to Tell the Story" Amen.

Patrick Preheim, co-pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church

Hymn of Response: #761 VT "I Love to Tell the Story"