

# Isaiah 49:1-7

## The Servant's Mission

49 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 he named me.

<sup>2</sup> He 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.

<sup>3</sup> And he said to me, "You are my servant,  
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

<sup>4</sup> 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."

<sup>5</sup> And now the LORD says,  
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—

<sup>6</sup> 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,  
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

<sup>7</sup> Thus says the LORD,  
the Redeemer of Israel and his 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."

# John 1:29-34

## The Lamb of God

<sup>29</sup> The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! <sup>30</sup> This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ <sup>31</sup> I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” <sup>32</sup> And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. <sup>33</sup> I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ <sup>34</sup> And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

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**Psalm 40 (The Message); Isaiah 49:1-7; John 1: 29-34**

**“Not So Light a Thing”**

**Kerra Becker English**

“It is too light a thing,” Isaiah says, “that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel.” Isaiah is talking about the promised Messiah here, the one whose job it will be to do exactly that – raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore the survivors of Israel. But God, through Isaiah’s mouth is saying that’s not enough. Too light a thing. The real promise of the Messiah is that the promised anointed one will be a “light to the nations” so that God’s salvation “may reach to the end of the earth.” That’s a bigger deal. Apparently, the Hebrew people needed to be told that their thinking was not big enough. The promise and the blessing would be bigger than believing that God loved them best. God would go beyond the chosen people to bestow salvation on everyone, until it would reach the end of the earth.

Something similar happens in John’s gospel during Jesus’ baptism. Each gospel has its own rendition of this story, so already we know it must be important, and it’s notable that there are similarities in the account across the board. John the Baptist gives his “I’m not worthy” speech. That’s the same. The Spirit descends like a dove. That’s the same. What isn’t the same is what John the Baptist chooses to say to Jesus. In John’s account, we hear that it’s “too light a thing” for Jesus to just be the chosen one. “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” John announces, and then testifies that Jesus is indeed the Son of God. This is big stuff. The Messiah is not just a parochial choice, or a hometown favorite. God has been working

on a plan to take away the sin of the whole WORLD. In John's cosmic understanding of Christ's presence at the beginning of time and to its very end, Jesus exemplifies this presence. It shows up, in him, completely. Christ's ability to make things new is beyond our comprehension, and in the way that Jesus walked the earth, the full presence of Christ is made manifest. Light to the nations. Redeemer of the whole WORLD. Salvation flowing to the end of the earth. Big, big stuff.

Now if your high school English teacher taught you about the kinds of devices writers use in literature to make a point, you might recall that this sounds a lot like *hyperbole*, language stretched to an exaggerated level so that you will NOT miss what it's trying to say. Perhaps it is that, a way of getting the hearer or reader to wake up and pay attention, OR maybe Isaiah and John are telling us what is completely true. God is not going to stop until salvation makes its way to the end of the earth. The living Christ won't let his guard down until the sin of the whole world is taken away.

Except, more often than not, we find that national lights are looking rather dim, and the sin of the world is as prevalent as it's ever been. Where is God's redemptive power now? Has the Lamb of God hidden himself from us? Are these big promises that don't really deliver?

There's a Jewish concept that I find rather helpful in times like these, it charges us, humankind, with *tikkun olam*, in English, the repair of the world. As part of Jewish mystical literature, in the beginning of the world, God contracted Godself into vessels of light, in other words, God had to limit Godself for the creation of the world to happen. These vessels then shattered, and their shards became sparks of light trapped within the material of creation. Whenever we do things that are pleasing to God or healing of the world, the light can return to God and it continues to bring about repair. Now, the phrase *tikkun olam* has been associated with

a Jewish concept of social justice – but even more than that – it’s about the full possibilities of healing, the kind of healing that reaches the end of the earth, that takes away the sin of the world. It’s the reminder that it’s “too light a thing” to believe that the promise is only for me and my tribe. The promise is meant for the whole world.

But somehow, we have to get to the point where that bigness, that extensiveness is part of our own story, and held deeply within our bones. It will never be true that the Lamb of God can take away the sin of the world, unless we acknowledge that the promise is real and that we believe it to be true. That’s where I’d like to share with you one more scripture reading, this time from the Psalms. The psalms are prayers of deep feeling – not *hyperbole* – but rather accounts of true human intensity. They speak our deepest truths in poetic form, and with compelling resonance about the human condition.

So together, let’s listen to Psalm 40 from the Message as a heartfelt prayer, a meditation on what it means to be a person acquainted with the big picture, and even bigger promises:

### **Psalm 40**

40 <sup>1-3</sup> I waited and waited and waited for GOD.

At last he looked; finally he listened.

He lifted me out of the ditch,  
pulled me from deep mud.

He stood me up on a solid rock  
to make sure I wouldn’t slip.

He taught me how to sing the latest God-song,  
a praise-song to our God.

More and more people are seeing this:

they enter the mystery,  
abandoning themselves to GOD.

<sup>4-5</sup> Blessed are you who give yourselves over to GOD,

turn your backs on the world's "sure thing,"  
ignore what the world worships;

The world's a huge stockpile  
of GOD-wonders and God-thoughts.

Nothing and no one  
comes close to you!

I start talking about you, telling what I know,  
and quickly run out of words.

Neither numbers nor words  
account for you.

<sup>6</sup> Doing something for you, bringing something to you—  
that's not what you're after.

Being religious, acting pious—  
that's not what you're asking for.

You've opened my ears so I can listen.

<sup>7-8</sup> So I answered, "I'm coming.

I read in your letter what you wrote about me,  
And I'm coming to the party

you're throwing for me.”

That's when God's Word entered my life,

became part of my very being.

<sup>9-10</sup> I've preached you to the whole congregation,

I've kept back nothing, GOD—you know that.

I didn't keep the news of your ways

a secret, didn't keep it to myself.

I told it all, how dependable you are, how thorough.

I didn't hold back pieces of love and truth

For myself alone. I told it all,

let the congregation know the whole story.

<sup>11-12</sup> Now GOD, don't hold out on me,

don't hold back your passion.

Your love and truth

are all that keeps me together.

When troubles ganged up on me,

a mob of sins past counting,

I was so swamped by guilt

I couldn't see my way clear.

More guilt in my heart than hair on my head,

so heavy the guilt that my heart gave out.

<sup>13-15</sup> Soften up, GOD, and intervene;  
hurry and get me some help,  
So those who are trying to kidnap my soul  
will be embarrassed and lose face,  
So anyone who gets a kick out of making me miserable  
will be heckled and disgraced,  
So those who pray for my ruin  
will be booed and jeered without mercy.

<sup>16-17</sup> But all who are hunting for you—  
oh, let them sing and be happy.  
Let those who know what you're all about  
tell the world you're great and not quitting.  
And me? I'm a mess. I'm nothing and have nothing:  
make something of me.  
You can do it; you've got what it takes—  
but God, don't put it off.

This is the prayer of someone who believes, and someone who holds God accountable for the promised salvation, for the removal of sin and for the dismantling of the idolatrous powers that prevent us from having a perfected world. I believe it can be our prayer, our dream too. And it's time for us to make the very same kinds of demands of our loving God so we can tell the world that God is great and hasn't quit on us yet!

On this Martin Luther King weekend, I am reminded of how important it is for us to believe in God's promises, again, and again and again and again. It may look as though we're backsliding, and maybe we are. The rise of frustrated and angry pockets of populism in our nation and in other nations across the globe seems to be bringing to light the racism, sexism and just about every kind of vilification of the "other" that has been lying just beneath the surface. Whenever and wherever people are threatened, the temptation to tribalism always comes back around. It plagued our ancestors and never quite seems to go away. Our propensity for compassion shrinks and our speech becomes more divided. Right now, it is no secret that we are finding all of our gaps becoming more and more divided, politically, economically, and even spiritually. Rather than look for the common good, we want to know who the common enemy is, and who will be with us when we go after the miserable lot of them. It's a good time to remind ourselves of who we are. We are the ones who proclaim a light to all nations, salvation to the end of the earth, and the reconciling and forgiving of sin for the entire, the ENTIRE WORLD.

At times, it seems ludicrous to hold this position, even about God, when the world seems to follow its own rules, and fostering hope isn't one of the outcomes. The more tribal positions make sense and seem to keep us on a safer path. But remember that Jesus and Martin Luther King, and all those who have followed the ways of non-violent resistance are the ones frequently pushed in the ditch and covered over in mud. Learn from the ones who never gave up! Keep proclaiming that God is bigger, bigger than kings and governments, bigger than the borders of any nation, and bigger than any sin that this world has to dish out. I may be a mess. I may have nothing. I may be a tiny voice on a global stage. And yet, I know God has what it takes to heal the world with love, and that's always been enough. Amen.