

Isaiah 49:1-7
Psalm 40:1-11

1 Corinthians 1:1-9
John 1:29-42

Our servant in our reading from Isaiah has been given quite a job description, a very serious and important call. The call was important enough that God had called the servant before he was even born. While the servant was in his mother's womb, God named him. God formed him in the womb to be a servant. It is a big job he has given the servant. The job description seems to be a bit overwhelming, to say the least. Babylon conquered Israel and took many of the Israelites to Babylon to live in exile. This was a tactic for the conquering, dominant power to weaken the nation that they had conquered. The servant's job is to return and gather Israel, that is to end Israel's exile in Babylon and bring Israel home. Cyrus later defeated the Babylonians, and permitted the Israelites to return home. But it is the servant who will head up the task of gathering. Just imagine if the current situation in Syria were to come to a peaceful end, and someone would be given the task to coordinate the return of all those refugees to Syria. I am sure that the Syrian numbers are far greater than the number of Israelites in Babylon. But back then there were not the communications and the transportation technology we have today. Yes, it is good news that Israel's exile has ended and that the people are to return home. Yet this is a huge undertaking for the servant. This is the servant's mandate, even prior to birth.

The servant had his doubts. Who wouldn't? The servant wondered about how effective a job he was doing, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity." This triad—according to Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann—is a powerful triad of negations. This servant was really feeling like he

had been some kind of failure! He does not come right out and say, I have failed,” but he does declare, “I have labored in vain.” All this work for nothing.

So what does God do about it! Does God give him an assistant, like God gave Moses when Moses complained about it being too great a task to speak to the Pharaoh? Or when God assigned seventy elders to help Moses when Moses was overwhelmed leading the people through the wilderness. No! God expands the work load; God adds to the servant’s job description: “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob; ... I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

It is too light a thing to bring the exiles back to Israel; too trivial. The servant is now granted a greater task. The servant’s work is now to “the nations,” to “the ends of the earth.” The concern now goes beyond the Jewish community to the Gentiles, from one small part of the world, to the whole world! It is one thing to have some work added to your job description when a company downsizes, but this is overwhelming! Come on, God. You’ve got to be kidding! The whole world!

This servant’s task is to be “light” and “salvation,” which refers to the well-being of all the people, a well-being as intended by God. Again, as Walter Brueggemann points out, “Light” is the antithesis of darkness, disorder, and chaos; and “salvation” is the counter to oppression, exploitation, and despair. The job description for the servant is a complete reversal of fortunes so that all may enjoy God’s resolve for the well-being of all creation. God desires that all people, Jews and Gentiles, experience well-being now.

The question this passage raises is, who is the servant? A lot of effort has been spent by Bible scholars trying to name this servant. Who is this historical figure? Probably the closest we can come is to declare that the servant is both faithful individual and obedient community, as one Old Testament scholar suggests. This call is not unique to any historical figure. This is a call that comes to all of us! It comes to the church. It comes to you and me.

It would not surprise me for anyone to object to this kind of servanthood. This is an overwhelming task. We may enjoy serving the church a few hours a week, singing in the choir, teaching Sunday School, serving on the session or a committee, or doing work around the building. But being a light and salvation to the world! Get me off. This is a huge task, and it may all seem so futile, especially in today's context.

I don't know about you, but it is very easy in the context of today's church to feel that the work of the church is in vain, nothing, vanity. How can we do any of this? As we have mentioned before, the church in American society, particularly mainstream churches, are in decline. The heyday of the mainstream church was in 1965. And I've been told that we will no longer ever see 1965. The total membership of the two former denominations that now make up the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was 4.1 million members in 1965. At the end of 2014 the total membership was less than 1.7 million. And to compound the problem, many of our church buildings are much larger than what they need, and so the church spends so much money on maintenance, upkeep, and utilities. Granted, buildings are necessary to do ministry. But most churches today have buildings that are two, three or more times larger than what they need. Our facilities are using up valuable and limited resources.

This sanctuary was built in the late 50s, a time when the mainline church was exploding. The membership of this church grew to over 600 in 1965. We needed this sanctuary back then. Today, we are at about 140. We have more building than we need. Don't get me wrong, I am not saying this sanctuary should not have been built. It was necessary back then. But, like so many churches, it is now much more than we need and we use a lot of resources to keep it up. That means less resources. Declining membership means less people to do ministry.

I am not crying wolf and declaring the demise of the church. What I am saying is that the church is living in a different context and the church must change to meet the challenges. Recently I heard that nearly half of Presbyterian churches are no longer served by seminary-trained, full time pastors. I have been told by some of our church members that I may be the last full-time minister this church has. I do not like hearing that. I do not want to leave or retire with that notoriety. I would feel like my labor has been in vain.

We need to remember that survival should not be our focus. Ministry is not just taking care of ourselves. Our focus is proclaiming God's light and salvation. It is God's enterprise. It may seem too overwhelming. But it is not our enterprise. This is God's enterprise. As God told the servant, "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." Because of God's resolve the servant will succeed even when appearing to be defeated. Because of God's resolve the church will succeed, but not in ways that our society defines success. The servant was confident that "my cause" and "my reward" are with God and that God counters the discouragement and futility. We

cannot let futility take over. God is faithful. This is God's enterprise, not ours. As Walter Brueggemann points out, it is a riddle of strength and weakness. Our weakness, God's strength. God's mission will not fail.

What that means for us at Heritage, I don't know; we don't know. Only God knows. There are good things happening here as we seek to be light and salvation. There is no doubt that things will change. As one commentator encourages, "May our aspirations be lifted up and returned to us in forms we never would have imagined."

Praise the Lord!

Happy are those who delight in God's word. Amen.