

January 15, 2023

Isaiah 49:1-7

¹Listen 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.

²God made my mouth like a sharp sword,
in the shadow of God's hand I was hidden;
I was made a polished arrow,
in God's quiver I was hidden away.

³And God said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

⁴But 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."

⁵And now the Holy One says,
who formed me in the womb to be her servant,
to bring Jacob back to her,
and that Israel might be gathered to her,
for I am honored in the sight of the Holy One,
and my God has become my strength –

⁶she 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."

⁷Thus says the Lord,
the Redeemer of Israel and the 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 God, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

My understanding of prophets, like Isaiah, is that they are not fortune- or future-tellers. They are truth-tellers, "God-tellers". Prophets tell us what will happen when we follow God, and when we don't. It is amazing to me that after 2,500 years Isaiah's words still ring true; they are very contemporary. They are prophetic.

When I read today's passage from Isaiah in preparation for today's service, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. came immediately to my mind. In so many instances the dialogue between God and Isaiah is the same as between God and Dr. King. Listen to these verses again. The dialogue begins with Dr. King at verse 2:

God made my mouth like a sharp sword,
And God said to me, "You are my servant, in whom I will be glorified."

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." God formed me in the womb to be her servant, to bring Jacob (Blacks) back to her, and that Israel (all USA) might be gathered to her, for I am honored in the sight of the Holy One, and my God has become my strength –

God says, "It is too light a thing that you (Martin) should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob (Blacks in USA) and to restore the survivors of Israel (all USA); 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 the Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, "Kings shall see and stand up, princes, shall prostrate themselves, because of God, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

Referencing Dr. King in this way is not hyperbole, not exaggeration. Dr. King was a liberation spokesperson for African-Americans – in the beginning. But, as he grew and developed, his vision widened and deepened. The result is that Dr. King has become a light to the nations, a world-renowned, a world-respected person; a prophetic person, across faith traditions.

It is also not hyperbolic to say that the concluding verse is true, although it is an already and yet-to-be truth. Dr. King, then, and for African-Americans still today, God speaks, in the words of Isaiah, “to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers.” This is the already truth still today.

The second half of this seventh verse is the yet-to-be truth: “Kings shall see and stand up, princes shall prostrate themselves, because of God, who is faithful.” Today systemic racism is still king and we, privileged by the color of our skins, we princes do not seem to be ready to “prostrate” ourselves, to humble ourselves, to admit the system is rigged and try to change, transform us and it.

Where do we begin? A start is honoring Dr. King as a prophet of God; a prophet worth listening to. We can do this by listening his disciples – other African-Americans and taking a closer look at ourselves, examining the blinders that keep us from seeing our privilege.

You may have heard of the book White Fragility by Robin DeAngelo; you may even have read it. This book helped me see some of the blinders I have. For example, Ms. DeAngelo says, it has often been the experience of African-Americans that when confronted with words and deeds about racism, Caucasians are very quick to be offended, speak of how hurt they feel (if not traumatized by the interaction), which changes the focus to the hurt Caucasians feel, sidelining the African-American’s pain. This is seen as a deft move (albeit often unconscious) to deflect criticism from a system that benefits one group in society and keeps us from being able to work together for change, for transformation, for liberation of ourselves and the racist system.

What then are we to do?

To begin with, we need to do the hard work of educating ourselves. To read books, like White Fragility, and not get upset by the challenges it presents. We need to listen, closely, to the perspectives of people of color. We need to be prepared to take what might feel like “hits” to us “good liberals”; to listen to, and even welcome, criticism without immediately becoming defensive.

Just as important we must challenge ourselves to be allies to those our social system has disempowered. When we hear words or see actions that denigrate another person or another race, we must be prepared to speak up and to speak out.

As an ally, we are challenged to stand in support of those disenfranchised by an unfair system. But we must be careful of where, and how, we stand. As we stand in support of those pushed aside by bias, we must make sure that we stand behind and not in front of them; that we allow them to speak, to tell their story, to share their perspective; that we follow their agenda, not one we think they should follow.

We, you and I, are privileged by the color of our skin. We are, in the words of Isaiah, “princes”, people with power. God calls us to be allies; to be ready to “prostrate” ourselves – to humble ourselves, admit the system we live in and by is rigged, and, as allies, we are to try to change, to transform ourselves and the system, led by those the system has disenfranchised.

We are to do this, in the words of Isaiah, because “God, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, ... has chosen you.”

May God give us the courage, vision, and strength to be an ally in “prostrated”, humble service to all who are in need of liberation. Amen.