

Second Sunday after Epiphany  
January 19, 2020

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**John 1: 29, 35-42**  
**Isaiah 49:1-6**

### **Heavy and Light**

*I had been thinking, 'I have toiled in vain, I have exhausted myself for nothing.' – yet all the while my cause was with YHWH – Isaiah 49:4*



Deciding to follow Jesus is often a long and winding road. Maybe you remember the story of what happened in the winter of 1955, two weeks after the birth of his first child. For a little over a year Martin Luther King, Jr. had been pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery. On December 1, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus. Four days later King was elected president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, an organization of black pastors and community leaders who would eventually lead the 116-day Montgomery Bus Boycott. King was 27 years old.

It did not take long for Montgomery and the nation to react to the boycott. King began receiving death threats and obscene phone calls at all hours of the day and night and intense pressure from local authorities. On January 26 he was arrested and jailed for “doing 30 in a 25 miles per hour zone.”<sup>i</sup>

After that, King couldn’t sleep. Overwhelming stress and exhaustion set in. One night, after receiving a particularly threatening phone call, he was alone, praying in the kitchen about how to make a graceful exit from all the tension and responsibility. Biographer, William M. Ramsey remembers that the young pastor prayed:

“I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But ... I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. [But] I am at the end.... I have nothing left.”

King later wrote about that moment. He said that as he prayed, suddenly he felt a resurgence of energy and peace, the presence of God in a way that he had never before in his life; and an inaudible voice said, “Stand up for righteousness, stand up for justice, stand up for truth, and God will be at your side forever.”<sup>ii</sup>

Where is God in your stress and anxiety? How *do we know* that God is with us? The Old Testament lesson this morning has a word for us. It is the second of Isaiah’s four servant songs, written for and by an oppressed and often despairing people, convinced that they had lost everything they valued in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

Last week I said that scholars don't agree on the identity of Isaiah's suffering servant. Christians can't help but read Jesus in Isaiah's poetry; Jews believe God's servant is Israel. Some have suggested the servant is the king and others think it's about the prophet Isaiah himself. Then again, maybe God's servant is the church – you and me. That's why we call scripture God's dynamic word – the Servant in this song can be all of those and more.

Here, Isaiah extends the good news of God's salvation beyond Israel's borders to all the nations of the world. I love the honesty. Isaiah will not sugar coat this – it is hard to be God's servant, overwhelming in every way; but (notice how the truth always comes after the "but") God is with us. "Stand up for righteousness, stand up for justice, stand up for truth, and God will be at your side forever."

Listen to the second Servant Song of Isaiah, 49:1-6:

*Islands, listen to me!  
Pay attention, distant people!  
YHWH called me before I was born  
and named me from my mother's womb.*

*God made my mouth a sharp sword,  
and hid me in the shadow of the hand of the Most High.  
The Almighty made me into a sharpened arrow,  
and concealed me in God's quiver.*

*The Holy One said to me,  
'You are my Servant, Israel,  
In whom I will be glorified.'*

*I had been thinking, 'I have toiled in vain,  
I have exhausted myself for nothing!' –  
yet all the while my cause was with YHWH,  
and my reward was with my God.*

*Thus says YHWH,  
who formed me in the womb to be God's Servant,  
who destined me to bring back the children of Jacob  
and gather again the people of Israel:*

*'It is not enough for you to do my bidding,  
to restore the tribes of Leah, Rachel and Jacob  
and bring back the survivors of Israel;  
I will make you a light to the nations,  
so that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.'* <sup>iii</sup>

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God... let us pray:

Creator God, we praise you. You have made us for yourself, and, before we draw our first breath, we are yours. What a glorious and humbling thing that is, and how frightening. It's hard to be that vulnerable. Your intimate knowledge of us means we can come as we are, without pretense. You know us all together. We are what we are because you have made us. So help us to rest in the knowledge that we are safe and cherished. Grant us wisdom; give us courage for the living of these days. In Christ we pray. Amen.

We've all been there, haven't we? We've all had our moments of thinking God is asking too much of us. Maybe you're having one of those moments today. At other times we convince ourselves that everything we've done, all our service and all the sacrifices we've made – all the faith we have placed in the work of God -- it was all for nothing, no use. This is the servant's struggle. He sings:

*I had been thinking, 'I have toiled in vain,  
I have exhausted myself for nothing!' –  
yet the whole of my cause was with YHWH,  
and my reward was with my God.*

Notice how quickly the Servant turns on his heels. Somehow he sets aside those doubts and returns to God! How is that possible? I'd like to know. In order to avoid ministry burn out we all need to know. How? It helps to remember that the Servant of Isaiah 49 isn't the first to experience disappointment and discouragement in his or her ministry. Sarah, the matriarch of Israel, waited for decades for God to deliver on the promise to make her family great and numerous, to be a blessing to the whole earth. Believing she was out of options, she suggested that her husband Abraham have a child with Hagar, her maid.

When Sarah and Abraham finally did have a child of their own, their great grandchildren ended up as slaves in Egypt. Moses led them to freedom, but not before he nearly lost his mind. He asked God, *What have I done to displease you that you have put the burden of these people on me?*<sup>iv</sup> And that's one of the nicer things he said about them.

Elijah, God's prophet, spent a good part of his life hiding from Queen Jezebel, who wanted to kill him. Jeremiah, sometimes called The Weeping Prophet, probably suffered from clinical depression. At one point he accused God of being *a deceitful brook, like waters that fail.*<sup>v</sup>

Martin Luther King, Jr. wasn't the first servant of God whose ministry brought him near the point of despair, but there's a lot in his ministry that can teach us about our own. Whether you're doing God's work in the church, or in the schools, in your family, in government, or business, or in the community, you need resilience, and so do I. Many experts say that resilience, the ability to bounce back from disappointment, embarrassment or failure, is the single most important thing we can teach our children.

So let's go with God's servant Martin back to January of 1956. Three days after King's dark night of the soul, when God spoke to him in that powerful way, he was at a church meeting when a bomb exploded on the front porch of his house (You know this story?) His wife, a friend, and

their infant daughter were at home. Miraculously, no one was hurt. But hundreds of angry people poured into the streets that night. King told them:

“If you have weapons, take them home... You can’t solve the problem through ... violence. We must love... no matter what others do.... *‘Love your enemies; bless those that curse you; pray for those who despitefully use you.’* This is what we must live by. We must meet hate with love.”<sup>vi</sup>

Do you see what he did? He focused them on the thing they could control: themselves. And he reminded them of their goal -- love. It worked. The crowd calmed, much as King himself had been calmed in the kitchen a few days earlier. But the road ahead did not get easier. It rarely gets easier. King found his help in prayer. Isaiah’s Servant managed to move from despair to light by remembering who he is. He said:

*The Almighty made me into a sharpened arrow,  
and concealed me in God’s quiver.*

No one becomes a sharpened arrow without pain. Sharpening is always loss and usually hidden, concealed in God. In fact, the grace of God in your life may be hidden right now, even from you, but it is there. Don’t be afraid to look at your loss or disappointment or failure. God is in it.

A friend reminded me that at the time of his assassination King was not the venerated leader we remember today. In fact, he was despised by much of America in 1968.

Why? Because he was reaching beyond the sphere where some people thought he belonged. He started talking about equal treatment – not just for African Americans, but for all...about human rights, income inequality and opportunity. He had the audacity to say that there are no boundaries, and that there should be no limits to God’s light. That was a lot for people to hear. It still is.

A few years ago, Walter Brueggemann wrote a book with a great title. It’s called, Disruptive Grace. In it the great Bible interpreter talks honestly about the call of the church to be God’s light, to move beyond the limits of what we know with imagination. He wrote: “Imagination is the capacity to picture the world out beyond what we take as established given...to speak an impossible word.”<sup>vii</sup>

I had a conversation last week with one of our Winter Relief guests about this very thing – together we tried to imagine Anne Arundel County as a place where she and others like her who have disabilities have a safe, simple place to live. It is not acceptable for people who have served this community to shuttle from church to church, sleeping on cots every night. Affordable senior housing is a topic we’re going to be discussing at Woods in the next few weeks.

Faith demands that we have those conversations, and live into that imagination, at least it does for those of us who pray, *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven.* Faith

requires us to listen to that midnight voice of the Spirit that says: “Stand up for righteousness, stand up for justice, stand up for truth, and God will be at your side forever.”<sup>viii</sup>

Let our light shine! And – this is important – remember it is supposed to be hard. Being God’s servant is a weighty thing, but remember, we are walking in the light.

In Isaiah’s song, God tells the servant:

*It is too light a thing that you should [simply] be my servant ...  
I will give you as a light to the world,  
That my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.*

I don’t know if you’ve thought much about the light you generate in your ministry reaching to the ends of the earth. Does that Sunday school class you teach, the meal you serve at Harundale Free Lunch, the house you build for Habitat *reach to the ends of the earth*? You don’t think? What if you were the tipping point? The threshold that causes the whole system to change. Someone has to be.

Writing at my desk yesterday afternoon I was watching a light snow fall and thinking how desperately our world needs compassion, justice and peace. There’s an old parable, I don’t know where I first heard it, about a conversation between a sparrow and a dove.

“What is the weight of a snowflake?” asked the sparrow.

“Nothing more than nothing,” said the dove.

“Nothing more than nothing, yes, well,” said the sparrow. “Just the other day I sat on a branch of that fir tree when it began to snow. Not heavily. Not a blizzard. Just like a dream without any violence. Having nothing better to do I counted the snowflakes settling on my branch. Their number was exactly 3,741,952. When the 3,741,953rd snowflake dropped on the branch --nothing more than nothing as you say -- the branch broke off.” Having said that, the sparrow flew away. The dove, an authority on peace since ancient times, thought for a long time about what the sparrow had said. “Perhaps,” said the dove, “there is only one person’s voice lacking for peace to come into the world.”

Yours could be that voice! Go be the light! Amen

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<sup>i</sup> Stanford University, The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute

<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/king-arrested-speeding-mia-holds-seven-mass-meetings>

<sup>ii</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. by William M. Ramsay, *Four Modern Prophets: Walter Rauschenbusch, Martin Luther King Jr., Gustavo Gurierez, Rosemary Radford Ruether*, John Knox Press 1986, 36.

<sup>iii</sup> *The Inclusive Bible*, Sheed and Ward, 2009

<sup>iv</sup> Numbers 11:11

<sup>v</sup> Jeremiah 15:18

<sup>vi</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. by Meg E. Cox, *Cynicism and Hope: Reclaiming Discipleship in a Postdemocratic Society*, Castcade, 2008, 38.

<sup>vii</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Disruptive Grace: Reflections on God, Scripture and the Church*, Fortress, 2011, 296

<sup>viii</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. by William M. Ramsay, *Four Modern Prophets: Walter Rauschenbusch, Martin Luther King Jr., Gustavo Gurierez, Rosemary Radford Ruether*, John Knox Press 1986, 36.

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