

Follow Your Star

Southminster Presbyterian Church

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Text: Isaiah 49:1-7

Opening Prayer

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing unto you our rock and our Redeemer.

Sermon

Today as we approach our text, we come to a passage just seven chapters after our passage from last week. That was known as the first servant song and today's is the second servant song.

Scholars raise some interesting questions about this text. In particular, who the passage is talking about. The very subject of the passage is in question.

This speaks to our approach to scripture and among us, we no doubt have various views of scripture. As some of you know, decades ago I did my undergrad studies at a Christian college that is highly regarded for its academics and is also conservative in its Christian theology. I am ever grateful for my experience there.

Some years later, having finished seminary, I was in an interview process for my first ordained position. It was with a presbyterian church, but one that was on the conservative end of the spectrum for presbyterians. I did indeed take a call at that church, and later

found out from one of the interview committee members who has become a life-long friend that I was the only candidate not asked whether I believe that scripture is inerrant. That is, whether scripture, in its original writing, was free of all errors. There's no need to go into why this stance seems untenable to me.

Why didn't they ask me? Because I went to a college that, at that time, held to that view and so they assumed that I did as well. Had they asked me, my answer probably would have resulted in them not calling me to serve their church! I've always found that humorous. Not surprisingly, I wasn't at that church for a long time.

All that is a side note to say that as followers of Jesus who seek to be true to participating in the work of the church in the world, we do not need our faith document to be beyond question or criticism.

In fact, in this passage, there's a pretty major question about the text. Small, but significant. Scholars who do biblical textual criticism, that is they actually study the text and compare different variations in early copies to try to determine what is the most accurate reading when there are differences, disagree as to whether the name Israel was actually in verse three or if it was a

later addition by a theologian or scribe. That's where it says, "And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

I think it's fascinating that someone might have added the name Israel. Whether it was interpretive because they thought that's what God meant, or an attempt to broaden who thought this text was for them, it's either funny or concerning that someone would just change the text. Perhaps most important to us, is to remember that, of course, when Israel is mentioned in the biblical text, it, of course, does not refer to the modern day nation of Israel since that was only created in 1947 . . . which is a whole different ball of yarn.

But enough biblical nerdiness for the day.

Regardless of the possible textual change, the psalm is best taken as referring both to individuals and to the nation. Today we'll take it as speaking to us as a community and individuals.

The psalm sounds like some other psalms that talk about a nearness and dearness to God. That we are created and

intimately known by God. That God called us before we were even born. There's a closeness that is gorgeous.

But then there's a shift and the person in this passage admits that they haven't accomplished much. They view their work as being in vain. There's a sense of vapidity. Discouragement. Maybe disillusionment. One feels bad for this person who is feeling this after so much apparent effort.

It hits a bit close to home, though, right?

This past Thursday evening, your session—those are the elders, the leaders in the church that you have elected (and you'll elect a new class of deacons and elders at our congregational meeting next Sunday) met to attend to the business of the church. We did a quick check-in using roses and thorns. That is, each person shared one place in life where they are finding joy and energy, encouragement or celebration, and one place in life where they are feeling discouraged or challenged.

When it came to thorns, top and central to several people—and I'm sure all the others were in agreement even if they chose to share something different—was the state of our society. Specifically our

nation and its relationships in the world. We can all just sigh. Individually and together we have a whole range of thoughts and feelings. Disbelief. Anger. Distress. Sadness. Despair.

I'm sure most of us can, with the author of this passage, say that we have sought to be good citizens of our nation and a good citizen of the world. We have made efforts to make it a better place, a safer place, a kinder place. And then when we watch the news, we find ourselves in disbelief. Has all our effort been for naught? How is it that we find ourselves in this situation?

What do we, as people of faith, do now?

But the servant takes a moment to recenter and recall. He takes the time to remember that he was originally called by God to do the work ahead of him. He allows himself to remember the hope he had at the beginning of the work. He remembers his call.

As people who follow Jesus, we are called to the work of justice and reconciliation. And so it makes sense that when the events of the world all seem that they are completely senseless and bringing about chaos and injustice and unfairness and harm, we

can lose hope. We can feel our spirits faltering within us. This passage reminds us that this is not new.

We know that we need to be active. Some of us have found those ways. Others are still trying to figure out where and how we find our handholds. So grateful for Di Bennett and others helping us find those as a community. Individually we may still be finding our way. But we need to find our way. Because right now many of us are feeling lost and helpless, not knowing what to do.

When Isaiah was in this place of desolation and feeling lost, God came with a word for him. Rather than a hug and saying, “I know. You tried. It’s okay.” God went big. God tells Isaiah that the original goal . . . the one that seemed waayy too overwhelming, was too small.

“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 (this was the original call); I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” The goal went from restoring a nation, to transforming the entire earth. Sheesh!

So maybe part of what we need to do to move from our paralysis of how in the world can this be happening? And does nothing up to this point in our history or in our lives count as enough? Is to go back to the basics.

Isaiah went back to the basics. He remembered who he was in light of Who God is. God is the One Who formed Isaiah. Isaiah remembers that He is honored in God's sight.

And that's who you are. Psalm 39 says of God, "For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." And that's who you are.

But maybe take some time this week and reflect on who you are in light of Who God is. Maybe that means spending some time meditating on Psalm 139. Or another passage that is meaningful to you. Remember who you are. Maybe use your Star Word to guide some meditation time . . . some time with your thoughts when you choose to be aware of the presence of the Infinite.

There may be things on the justice to-do list, and far be it from me to say to skip those. I'll go to a training for clergy related to

immigration issues this week. But besides those things, let me encourage you to take some time and remember who you are. Remember who we are. Reflect on who you are and what you have been given. Reflect on what you have felt called to. Reflect on your Star Word. Let's take some time to recenter. Some time to breathe.

And then let's come back together next week. Let's see if we might possibly have any more room in our hearts and minds. And as we open ourselves to remembering and receiving who we are, maybe we'll make room for receive something new. Because God knows the task before us looms larger than we foresaw. Let's be prepared.

Amen.