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### The Light in 'Them'

*Isaiah 49:1-11 & Psalm 40:1-13*

Good Morning,

My favorite part about working off of the lectionary is getting to see the way different texts play together. Our Isaiah text comes from a prophet who is witnessing incomprehensible disaster in their community. They are living in exile after being completely overtaken by a neighbouring empire. The people the prophet speaks to are going through daily suffering and extreme doubt in their relationship with God. In the Psalms the song given is sung out by survivors, who are praising God for the intervention that has taken place in their lives. They are rejoicing at their release from intolerable circumstances and see this turn of events as a gift. It's known as one of the thanksgiving Psalms. We'll start with Isaiah.

The beginning of Isaiah is this empowering declaration of rooted identity in being God's creation **"YHWH called me before I was born, and named me from my mother's womb... The Holy One said to me 'you are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified'"** It keeps going on about how because of who this community is as a people they can take confidence that God will use them to bring justice and peace once more in the world. The prophet is calling upon the covenant of God, and in a time of complete peril they give a vision of the transforming work of peace. **"Congested roadways will become lush pastureland for them. They will never hunger or thirst, and scorching wind and sun will never plague them; for the One who has compassion on them will lead and guide them to springs of water. I will make roads through all the mountains, and my highways will be raised up."**

This passage is like a revolutionary speech to a people whose spirits are completely crushed, who feel insignificant and lost. This prophet gets up and goes ‘this light of God is in you, you were crafted by God, designed for work of restoration and peace.’ I walk away from this passage thinking I’ve just heard the worlds most inspiring Ted Talk. All I can see is myself as this member of the crowd, full of renewed vigor and a heart full of justice ready to renew the world. But the interesting thing is, I’m not the one the prophet is talking to.

The crowd of Israelites in exile are the same community that the prophets have been berating for chapter after chapter for being the unjust ones, for ruining society, and bringing nothing but destruction and pain to their own community. They were cruel. Some say those in exile would have been the more privileged of the group because they were able to get away rather than be killed or enslaved by the dominating empire. They were self-serving, they ignored the prophets, and they abused their power when they had it.

They are also living in exile, suffering, ripped out of their homes, and have lost their connection to God. The prophet speaks to them, the verses shifting from the prophet being called to go to them, to the people being designed for God’s work of peace. Can you imagine being this prophet? The difference between what you might want to say and what you have been called to speak.

Christina Cleveland writes in her book ‘Disunity in Christ’ about the dividing forces that keep us apart, that prevent us from connecting to those people that haven’t earned our stamp of approval. She points out how this exclusion is usually done out of a fear that simply by being in relationship with those people, our own worth will be diminished. She opens her book with this relatable example:

**“I was taking a bus ride through the snow-capped Rockies in Colorado, complaining to myself about this guy at my church who drove me crazy. Ben and I were pretty much the only unmarried adults in our small church community, so we were often paired together during social events. As if this weren’t annoying enough, Ben happened to be quite possible the most offensive person I knew.**

**I wish I could say this wasn’t the case, but everything about Ben bugged me—from his inflexible and preachy conservatism to his career as an engineer who designs nuclear warheads (I mean, *seriously?*) to his dorky Hawaiian-print button downs (alas, perhaps his greatest offense). Anyway, there I was riding through Colorado, lamenting the fact that Ben was part of my life and plotting ways to avoid interacting with him ever again. And suddenly I was confronted with the idea that Ben was going to be in heaven.**

**With me. For all eternity. And I would never, ever be rid of him. Suddenly the idea of frolicking on the streets of gold seemed less enticing. *That’s okay, I quickly reassured myself. Heaving is going to be a big, big place.*”**

Later in the book, Cleveland references a conversation she had with a colleague when he realized she identified as a Christian: **“But you shouldn’t associate with all those ridiculous people who call themselves Christian - it makes you look bad.”** I have found the same thought running through my own head. When a friend confides in me about the abuse she suffered at the hands of the church, or when I see a headline with horrific acts done in the name of my faith tradition, or if I open a history book. I’m not one of those Christians, that’s not my group, those are different Christians - the wrong kind of Christians.

And our Isaiah prophet goes to exactly *'those kind of people'* and tells them that they are formed by God to do the restoring work of this world, that they will be the light for the world, the beacon of coming peace. There is no call to repentance or condemnation, just this reminder of who they are, who they were created to be, and then through this encouragement they find hope and assurance.

In our Psalm text I want to bring your focus to the middle section on your page **“you don’t desire sacrifice or oblation, instead you made my ears receptive to you; you asked no burnt offering or sacrifice for sins from me. And so I declared, “Here I am! I have come! In the scroll of the book it is written about me.”** Can’t you just feel the relief in this response? Imagine it in our prophet’s crowd? Instead of the lecturing and condemnation that you might very well have earned, that would bring further shame to the pain of your lived reality. You hear that you are called to be light, that you have a place, that God crafted you, that you are designed for good. The moment that you can look back up and say **“Here I am... in the scroll of the book it is written ... about me.”**

Mary Oliver has a beautiful poem I am going to read, and I invite you to listen to it in conversation with out Isaiah text.

## Wild Geese

**You do not have to be good.**

**You do not have to walk on your knees**

**For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.**

**You only have to let the soft animal of your body**

**love what it loves.**

**Tell me about your despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.**

**Meanwhile the world goes on.**

**Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain**

**are moving across the landscapes,**

**over the prairies and the deep trees,**

**the mountains and the rivers.**

**Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,**

**are heading home again.**

**Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,**

**the world offers itself to your imagination,**

**calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting --**

**over and over announcing your place**

**in the family of things.**

Previously this poem has brought me great personal comfort and relief.

With our scriptures I get to see a new invitation. What does it mean to be called to be the prophet, the one offering the poem to people who have done great harm, but are nonetheless still suffering? What if God asks us to give this gift to people who aren't easy to love, who we can't even imagine would be interested in bringing about God's vision for peace? What does it mean to keep believing that each person is created for good and has within them the indwelling of God's light? To not delight when people face the consequences of their own cruelty but to come in with compassion?

The devastation of these peoples' choices is tangible and real and crushing. And instead of God turning away, God remains and continues to help weave the world back together, with the very people who are tearing it apart. Because they are worth keeping, despite their mistakes. Because we are worth keeping, despite our darkness. Because we are loved, and are made up of love, and are called to continue to participate in this love. To guide and nudge, and nourish one another despite our blundering, harmful, mistakes. To know the contagious power of gifting someone with the knowledge that they are loved, until they can look out and continuing to live from this knowledge.

The survivors in the Psalms give us a complicated picture of praise and lament. It's clear that they aren't all better, after this wave of thanksgiving comes, we have these verses of fear. **"Misfortunes surround me, far more than I can count; my sins entrap me and I am unable to escape. They outnumber the hairs on my head, and my courage is drained."** There is a transition between assurance and anxiety, but it is linked by a thread to hope. The first words in verse one: **"Unyielding, I called to you"** have also been translated as: **"hopeful, I hoped for you."** These are a people that have been given the gift of hope. Their sins are innumerable and they don't know what the next right thing is, but they know somebody's listening to their prayer. In the same breath with which they admit their brokenness, they affirm their place in the family of God. It isn't a tidy happy ending. If it was it wouldn't be very useful for us in our messy, complicated world.

I'm thankful for the good news here in the muddling of these two texts, of the world of scripture and our world today. The affirmation that there is goodness in us, that we can't squash out what God has knit into the fibre of our being. That our job is not to berate ourselves, or every fool we run into. Instead, I can keep creating space for 'them' to live into the beacon of light we were all designed to be. Amen.