

Light of the Nations

T.J. CAMPO·SUNDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2018

The Wait of the World | Celebrating the Servant of the Lord

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Isaiah 49.1-16

Listen to Me, O islands, And pay attention, you peoples from afar. The LORD called Me from the womb; From the body of My mother He named Me. 2He has made My mouth like a sharp sword, In the shadow of His hand He has concealed Me; And He has also made Me a select arrow, He has hidden Me in His quiver. 3He said to Me, "You are My Servant, Israel, In Whom I will show My glory." 4But I said, "I have toiled in vain, I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity; Yet surely the justice due to Me is with the LORD, And My reward with My God."

5And now says the LORD, who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant, To bring Jacob back to Him, so that Israel might be gathered to Him (For I am honored in the sight of the LORD, And My God is My strength), 6He says, "It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant To raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth." 7Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and its Holy One, To the despised One, To the One abhorred by the nation, To the Servant of rulers, "Kings will see and arise, Princes will also bow down, Because of the LORD who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel who has chosen You."

8Thus says the LORD, "In a favorable time I have answered You, And in a day of salvation I have helped You; And I will keep You and give You for a covenant of the people, To restore the land, to make them inherit the desolate heritages; 9Saying to those who are bound, 'Go forth,' To those who are in darkness, 'Show yourselves.' Along the roads they will feed, And their pasture will be on all bare heights. 10"They will not hunger or thirst, Nor will the scorching heat or sun strike them down; For He who has compassion on them will lead them And will guide them to springs of water. 11"I will make all My mountains a road, And My highways will be raised up. 12"Behold, these will come from afar; And lo, these will come from the north and from the west, And these from the land of Sinim." 13Shout for joy, O heavens! And rejoice, O earth! Break forth into joyful shouting, O mountains! For the LORD has comforted His people And will have compassion on His afflicted.

14But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me, And the Lord has forgotten me." 15"Can a woman forget her nursing child And have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you. 16"Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands; Your walls are continually before Me.

This is the Advent Season... a time to reflect and to celebrate the arrival/coming/advent of Jesus Christ. This is the third sermon from the Prophet Isaiah. He wrote about 700BC... and we're focused on the second part of that book where he predicts a time of restoration after the judgment that he foretold in the first part of the book.

In the second part of the book (CH 40ff) Isaiah tells of this Character – “the Servant of YHWH” – and this Figure will somehow restore God's people after they have faced the consequences of their unfaithfulness.

The consequences will come in the form of Babylon – this power empire is like a simmering caldron (Jer 1.13) ready to boil over into Judah/Jerusalem and it will destroy the city and the Temple and take a large number of captives back to Babylon as slaves.

Today, we hear Isaiah saying, “The consequences will NOT last forever... the slaves will return to the Land of Promise and the Temple will rise again (be rebuilt) BUT WILL YOUR HEARTS RETURN TO GOD?...Will the CAUSE of the consequences be fixed?”

WHEN YOU COME BACK TO YOUR PLACE – will anything be different? ...Your cheating hearts got you into this trouble – but when the trouble lifts, will your wandering hearts still lead you away from God?”

That's what we want to explore today – how can trouble translate into character change – not just “learning your lesson” but a kind of spiritual alchemy (when lead becomes gold) – a kind of death and resurrection.

Let's look at: 1) Misery 2) Mystery and 3) Mastery

Remember, Isaiah is standing on a mountain and looking THROUGH a valley of misery and trouble and chastening from God... and Isaiah sees beyond this time of extreme misery to another mountain – a new peak, a time of return and restoration in the future that'll be far better than it is now...

The people aren't much interested (6.9ff) in Isaiah and his vision of judgment followed by renewal because they've become spiritually dull... Their spiritual adultery has so LONG CONTINUED that their hearts aren't even thinking of God: (1.21) “How the faithful city has become a harlot...” – They only think of God as kind of talisman/mascot – they see the Temple as a kind of good-luck-charm or insurance policy.

So when Isaiah says, “after many generations of our rejecting God – now HE is going to give us our way... He'll give us the independence we want (5.3-6). “You WANT Me to leave you alone – and I will.”

Isaiah's final section (CH 40ff) where he promises restoration really doesn't mean anything because they don't believe any consequences are coming...

But they WILL believe it...when they SEE it. The trouble will get their attention in a BIG way...and THAT is often the way (maybe always – sad to say!) We sadly need to experience trouble that we can't handle in order to be sensitized to spiritual things.

As long as we're clipping along and sort of "taking care of business" and managing our lives, succeeding, NOT PERFECTLY ("No one's perfect...") but as we keep it together we may not give God much of a thought... We may pray at meals...we may attend church...live what we think is a moral life ("No one's perfect...")... We thank God (Luke 18.11: "I thank You that I'm NOT like other people...like this Tax Collector") but (as God said – Isaiah 29), "these people draw near with their words and honor Me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts far from Me, and their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote..."

So God sends misery... to wake us up. Trouble is very often a necessary component of real spiritual VITALITY. We usually (I want to say ALWAYS) we have to be broken before we can get past morality and religion and actually connect to God and know true peace and JOY... We have to die and be raised.

And that brings me to this story I found this week – actually my brother sent it to me... I'm not sure who wrote it or if it even happened but I think it's a really good illustration with a few little qualifications. So let me tell you the story and then fine-tune it a bit.

A woman is waiting in a long line at a Dollar Store with her two sons – one is a toddler and the other is ten years old. The ten-year-old has a bag a glow-sticks... and the toddler wants one and eventually starts to cry and make a scene...so the mother opens the bag and gives the toddler a glow stick. AND HE IS HAPPY, waving around his prize – he won!

As they're leaving the store, the ten-year-old takes back the glow stick and the toddler explodes in rage... and the mother yells at the older child but then notices that he is bending the stick...breaks the capsule inside and the stick begins to GLOW...

Then he gives it back to the baby who is utterly delighted/mystified especially as it's DARK outside the store and the GLOW STICK ...is doing its job.

And the point is... like the people in Isaiah's day, most people (ALL people?) have to be broken before they glow... have to experience some aspect of life that's unmanageable...unfixable... catastrophic or shameful or scandalous or unbearable. It could be a big loss, a death, a sickness, old-age...OR just a realization that "while I'm a good tax-paying citizen I DO NOT MEASURE UP TO GOD'S commands – I have to admit I do not love God with all my heart should mind and strength and I don't love my neighbor like I love myself – my life is riddled with moral failings."

Now here are my caveats (arrived at with the help of some friends): 1) The light is NOT some form of human potential that comes out only when we're put in really hard straits and then we dig deep and we really shine.

2) I guess I really do believe this happens to everyone who truly knows God – I keep saying it happens to many or most but really it's everyone.

3) Getting broken DOESN'T guarantee you will shine. The same sun that softens the wax – also hardens the clay. AND in response to misery, some are made better while others are made bitter. In fact you see it in this very passage – "But Zion said, 'The LORD has forsaken me, and the Lord has forgotten me.'"(14)

So the burning question IS – how can a kind of spiritual alchemy take place – where lead is turned to gold...where misery becomes transformative and changes not just my behavior but my character?

And Isaiah, has the people move from misery INTO mystery... He is telling us about a pipeline of grace that God has opened for planet earth. A man named Abraham...and the One Living and True God revealed Himself to Abraham and his wife Sarah, an old infertile couple but God miraculously made them fertile and they had a child, Isaac. And God multiplied this family over many generations. (41.8)

Then He situated this family, now a nation, in a Land that He had promised them...like a Vine that He planted (Isa 5)... and they were to produce fruit to share with the whole world – the knowledge of God would come through this people for ALL nations.

In the middle of this Land God gave them a great city, Jerusalem, and in the middle of the city a Temple... and all the nations were to be able to see IN THIS PEOPLE...in this LAND...in this CITY...in this Temple, who God IS and what it meant to worship Him. Israel was God's servant, a City set on a hill, a light to the nations... AND IT WORKED! (1 Kings 10)

But the Servant of YHWH was unfaithful... His Israel she "played the harlot" and turned to other gods (that were not gods at all!) And then after many generations of her adultery, God gave her the independence she wanted – but it was only self-destruction ... Babylon came and plucked up God's vine, uprooted the people, destroyed the city and even it's Temple (where people could meet God!)

But there would be a resurrection... That's what Isaiah was saying ... after Babylon, a New Exodus, after death a New Life... It's a pattern: life, death and resurrection. AND today's passage points not only to the pattern but also to this MYSTERIOUS FIGURE who would be the ultimate fulfillment of Israel's calling and of the death and resurrection pattern.

Isaiah points to this ultimate Servant who completes Israel's calling... He will show God's glory NOT only in Israel's restoration after Babylon but eventually to the whole world. He'll show God's merciful heart to ALL people, "It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant To raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth." (6)

The word, "My salvation" in Hebrew is the word "Yeshua" – as in Joshua...which (as we've seen IS the name of the Messiah) – "You shall call Him Yeshua for He will save His people from their sins..."

And this Salvation from God, this Servant who embodies Israel and fulfills Israel's mission to the world – HE IS THE MYSTERIOUS INGREDIENT that produces that spiritual alchemy, turning lead into gold, turning crisis and misery and trouble into beauty and character transformation.

He is the GLOW... it's not human potential as people dig deep and respond to difficulty with some True Grit they didn't know they had...

No! "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves..." (2Cor 4.7)

It's NOT that we achieve mastery of our circumstances and demonstrate astounding willpower and determination – we die with Jesus Christ and we're raised to New Life – the glow in us is the Life of God in the weak shell of a believer.

Jesus Christ lived to obey in my place (He is the Covenant as we saw also last week) and died for me (He took my blame) and rose ...SO THAT I TOO "might know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death" (Phil 3.10)...

This is not just "learning my lesson" – it's coming to the end of myself and my resources, trusting in Him who has my name (v. 16) inscribed on the palms of His hands and who always is building me – my walls, my construction, my defense is ever before Him.

It's not so much about MY mastery of life as His gracious mastery of ME. As I trust in His life, death and resurrection and the more THAT becomes my solitary hope in the face of trouble, then I am, like Gerhard Forde, wrote, (I am) "constantly being raised from the tomb of all pious ambition to something quite new. The believer has to be renewed daily in that. The Old Being is to be daily drowned in repentance and raised in faith. The progress of the Christian life is not our movement toward the goal; it is the movement of the goal in upon us."

The goal is moving IN on me... I am becoming convinced EVEN when really tough stuff comes down that God has NOT forgotten me – even parents may forget their children – but God, our Father in Heaven will NOT and CAN NOT forget us. The life, death and resurrection of the Servant PROVES it forever!

When I see His beautiful mastery of my life... when I focus on the Truth that He will eventually bring God's salvation (yeshua) to the ends of the earth ...and that even today from the little seed of Israel ... today... billions name the Seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ as LORD... and history will end in His praise... And when I see that I join the chorus even NOW and sing: "Shout for joy, O heavens! And rejoice, O earth! Break forth into joyful shouting, O mountains! For the LORD has comforted His people and will have compassion on His afflicted." (13)

One last thought – (Gordon helped me see it this week): and that is that some people undergo such deep and profound pain and trouble that they don't glow... And our job, we who are being conformed to the life, death and resurrection pattern of the Servant – our job is to come along side them as His agents of compassion and to refresh them (v.10).

Our place is to be listeners... and when we've really listened to say, "He loves you more than your own mother loved you...more than ANYONE could ever love you... See His hands...See His nail-scarred hands... and put yourself there... and rest."