

Rev. Lisa Schrott
January 18, 2025
John 1:35-42 & Isaiah 49:1-7
A Light to the Nations

Our second scripture reading comes from the book of Isaiah, from the 49th chapter. This passage falls in what is known as Second Isaiah, texts that provide a message of hope and comfort to the people of Judah who have been exiled to Babylon. Included in this message are four poetic passages known as the Servant Songs. These songs speak of one who will bring justice to a world that so desperately needs to hear a voice proclaiming shalom. These four servant songs end with words about a servant, who through their suffering brings redemption to the people and the promise of a new creation.

The first Servant Song in Isaiah 42 speaks of one who will bring justice to the nations, which is referred to as the coastlands. This servant will be gentle, with a quiet voice and yet will be effective in bringing liberation to the people. This morning's scripture is the second of the Servant Songs. In it, the Servant is commissioned to restore Israel and be a light to the nations and spread God's salvation to the ends of the earth. Hear now these words of promise from Isaiah 49:1-7:

Listen 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 he named me.
He made my mouth like a sharp sword;
 in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow;
 in his quiver he hid me away.
And he said to me, "You are my servant,
 Israel, 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."

And now the Lord says,
 who formed me in the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him,
 and that Israel might be gathered to him,
for I am honored in the sight of the Lord,
 and my God has become my strength—
he 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."

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

The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

It has been a hard week – really two weeks – for many of us. Brian and I lived in the suburbs of Minneapolis from the mid 1990's to mid 2000's. I worked at the Univ. of Minnesota Medical School for 8½ years and Brian worked in the St. Paul suburbs for 10 years. We were married there. We bought our first house in Brooklyn Park, MN. Its claim to fame when we lived there was that professional wrestler Jesse Ventura was its mayor before being elected Governor of Minnesota. This past year Brooklyn Park was in the news because on June 14 a man disguised himself as a member of law enforcement and shot and killed House of Representatives Speaker Melissa Hortman and her husband Mark. The Hortman's house was at the other end of the golf course where Brian and I had our first apartment. Too close to home for me.

While I have been spending far less time on social media over the last several months for a variety of reasons, this week I checked in with my friends from my years in the Twin Cities. A friend of mine shared a Facebook reel from James Vukelich, a member of the Ojibwe nation. He shares his heritage by sharing Ojibwe words each day and their English translation. Being a resident of the Twin Cities, his post on January 7 included the words for anxiety, sadness, anger and rage. He ended the reel with this word: ayaangwaamizin, which translates to "please do take care." He went on to add: "Please be careful. Please be aware of the fact that your actions and choices and decisions have the potential to affect people that you may never meet, speak to, listen to or even hold."¹ I was struck by this word that is used for both warning people about thin ice on the lake and how to engage in interpersonal relationships.

Ayaangwaamizin is also the name for *The International Journal of Indigenous Philosophy*, which shares that "Translated literally, it [Ayaangwaamizin] it is usually read as "to go

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/reel/888633136957130>

carefully," "to tread carefully." But beyond this superficial meaning is the idea that the actions of persons have consequences for a larger whole. The term is used in a context that assumes the meaningfulness of existence and action; we do not live in a "neutral" universe that exists beyond and outside ourselves. We are a part of the fabric of the universe."²

This is the take home message of the Servant Song from Isaiah we heard this morning. While the Lord is calling the servant to redeem the people of Israel, saying in verse 5: "And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be God's servant, to bring Jacob back to the Lord, and that Israel might be gathered to him.", that is not enough. That is too small a vision. As my study Bible says: "The Lord charges the Servant to move beyond salvation of his own people into a universal realm."³ And in verse 6 we hear: "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."

Talk about a small task... I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth. In the passage from the Gospel of John we heard Brian read, we hear the calling of two of Jesus' disciples. The version in the Gospel of John is a bit different than the version we are used to hearing about the fisherman who were told to drop their nets and follow Jesus. We will hear that passage from the Gospel of Matthew in two weeks. What I find compelling in John's version, is Jesus' remark to these two men. When they ask Jesus where he is staying, Jesus says "Come and see." I don't think Jesus is trying to be self-deprecating or snarky or a show-off. Rather, he is asking them see his identity – to understand who he is and remain with him. The Greek word translated at "remain" is often translated as "abide" – a verb used over 40 times in John's Gospel.⁴

As the Ojibwe remind us "we do not live in a "neutral" universe that exists beyond and outside ourselves. We are a part of the fabric of the universe." "Come and see," Jesus said. God has big plans ahead, a vision of peace and justice, of hope and mercy, for all of creation. I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

In the world we live in today, those are mighty big shoes to fill. So big that we might feel so inadequate to the task that we just throw in the towel, doomscroll on our phones all day, down another pint of Ben and Jerry's and binge the latest escapist reality show. In her weekly devotional, church historian and theologian Kate Bowler refers to this phenomenon as *secondary suffering*. She says, "Secondary suffering is not the wound itself. It is the demand that the wound explain itself, redeem itself, or prove its worth. It is what happens when finite

² <http://www.hanksville.org/NAresources/indices/announce/Ayaangwaamizin.html>

³ Isaiah. *The Discipleship Study Bible*. Westminster John Knox, 2008; p1000

⁴ Salt Commentary. Lamb of God. Salt's Commentary for Epiphany 2. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/1/4/lamb-of-god-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-2>

lives are forced to bear the weight of cosmic coherence. ... Secondary suffering doesn't ask, What happened to you? It asks, Why haven't you fixed this yet?"⁵

Secondary suffering is where I found myself this week here in Michigan, when a city I loved was being torn apart. When my friends were writing of what they were witnessing in streets where I had walked and shopped and dined. A light to the nations. Ha! I couldn't even find words of comfort and assurance that things would be ok. Because honestly I don't know if they will be ok.

My mother was a big fan of Peter, Paul and Mary, and their music was a backdrop of my childhood, before I had my own turntable and cassette deck in my bedroom. The line from the song *Blowing in the Wind*, "How many deaths will it takes till we know that too many people have died?" was running through my head all week. A line written by Minnesotan Bob Dylan. I didn't learn until much later in the week that Dylan was related to Renee Nicole Good, and is working to support her family during this tragic season.⁶

"How many deaths will it takes till we know that too many people have died?" And we hear from the prophet Isaiah the frustration that comes from our perceived inadequacy. "The Lord called me before I was born; while I was in my mother's womb he named me. ... And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified. But I said, "I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity..." And yet, even with these words that harbored insecurities and doubts, the Lord says, "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth. ... Kings shall see and stand up; princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

And friends, we have been chosen. We are living in a time and place where our words and actions matter. Our prayers matter. What is in our hearts matter. And we have been preparing for this work through every scripture we have read, every hymn we have sung, every prayer that we have uttered in the darkness of the night. We have been washed in the waters of baptism, flowing over us with mercy and binding us in community; we have absorbed the light of Christ through every pore in our body so that we might be a beacon in the darkness. So that our glow may overcome the shadows.

In the words of preparation in the bulletin, I shared a quote from the Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber. I shortened the quote and I'd like to share a bit more of it, because it gave me hope in a very dark week. She writes of the concept of phosphorescence:

⁵ Kate Bowler. Welcome to January. In America. January 14, 2026. <https://katebowler.substack.com/p/welcome-to-january-in-america>

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/61577369472858/posts/updated-news-the-entertainment-world-is-reeling-after-bob-dylan-visibly-shaken-r/122159513228912315/>

Phosphorescence in case like me, you forgot, works like this: the energy goes in quietly. The transformation happens unseen. And only later—often much later—does the light begin to show, but it's only visible in the dark. Which is frustrating, frankly, for those of us who prefer immediate results or visible proof.

Phosphorescence. Maybe this is how a life of faith actually works. ... You have been absorbing God's light all along—even when you don't believe it, even when you aren't paying attention, even when you are phoning it in, even when you are pious as all get out.

And so when things get dark—and they will—the light of God's word, shines enough to be a lamp unto our feet. Stumbling, maybe. Dancing, sometimes. But always the next step is lit. Not because you have made yourself dazzling. But because the Light has already found you. ... Because the light of Christ does not vanish when the world goes dark. It lingers.

And then one day— when the power fails, when the star disappears, when certainty collapses— there you are. Glowing just a bit. Not because you are shining with your own goodness or faith. But because you were once close enough to the Light of the world that it soaked into you. And that kind of light has a way of leading people by another road.⁷

And friends that is how we answer the call to be a light to the nations. We absorb the light radiating around us in this sanctuary; the baptisms and weddings and celebrations of life and Youth Sundays; the music that has stirred our souls and made us dance and weep; the bread of life and the cup of salvation we have shared with old friends and strangers; the words of scripture we can't quite recite perfectly, but whose truth is secure in our neural synapses; the hugs and the smiles and the words of reassurance when everything is not ok. All of this and more has transformed us, like the energy that leads to phosphorescence. And only later—often much later—does the light begin to show, but it's only visible in the dark.

So on these dark and cold winter days here in Michigan; in these dark and cold days of our nation's history we may feel that we have nothing left in our souls to offer to this world. And yet we do. We can radiate God's liberating love and redemption for all of creation. We can advocate for justice and humane policies for all people. We can feed and provide healing; we can pray and we can shout. We can love even when - especially when - the loving is hard. On the weekend when we recognize the life and work of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, we can embody his words, which will be shared in a few minutes and be a light to the nations. May it be so. Amen.

⁷ Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber from Phosphorescence; a Sermon For Dark Times, January 12, 2026. Online at <https://thecorners.substack.com/p/phosphorescence-a-sermon-for-dark>