

# THE SERVANT OF YAHWEH

Isaiah 49:1-7

Second Sunday after the Epiphany (Series A)

January 19, 2020

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The Old Testament lesson for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany comes from *The Prophet Isaiah*, chapter 49, verses 1 through 7. It is on page 520 of the pew Bible. This is the second of four “Servant Songs” in Isaiah. The first one is in chapter 42 (v. 1-4), which we read last week. Then there is the one for today. The third is in chapter 50 (v. 4-9). And the fourth, and most famous one, is in chapters 52 and 53 (52:13-53:12). These Servant Songs all reveal the Servant of Yahweh, and how he serves both Yahweh and his people. Please stand as you are able for God’s Holy word. From Isaiah 49, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus’ name.

- 1 Listen to me, O coastlands,  
and give attention, you peoples from afar.  
The LORD called me from the womb,  
from the body of my mother he named my name.
- 2 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.
- 3 And he said to me, “You are my servant,  
Israel, in whom I will be glorified.”
- 4 But I said, “I have labored in vain;  
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;  
yet surely my right is with the LORD,  
and my recompense with my God.”
- 5 And now the LORD says,  
he who formed me from 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 eyes of the LORD,  
and my God has become my strength—
- 6 he says:  
“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant  
to raise up the tribes of Jacob  
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;  
I will make you as a light for the nations,  
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”
- 7 Thus says the LORD,  
the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One,  
to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation,  
the servant of rulers:  
“Kings shall see and arise;  
princes, and they shall prostrate themselves;

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because of the LORD, who is faithful,  
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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Earth is a deeply divided place. We're divided into teams. We're divided into parties. We're divided into nations. We're divided into religions. We're divided into pretty much every distinctive you can think of. Some of this is relatively innocent, but some of it is not. We need some unity. But where does that come from? What do we have to be united in? And who will unite us in whatever we might come up with. Into the midst of this deeply divided world, Yahweh sends his servant.

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Most of this passage consists of the Servant speaking. It's a sermon given by the Servant to the world. Sometimes he quotes what the LORD, Yahweh, says to him, but it's the Servant who preaches it.

The ancient question with this passage is who the Servant is. That's the question with all four of the Servant Songs and, really, throughout chapters 41 through 53 of Isaiah. It's the question the Ethiopian Eunuch asks of Philip in the book of Acts (8:34). Who is the Servant? His identity is progressively revealed over the course of the four Servant Songs, and so I'd like to take you on a quick tour through them. You might already know who the Servant is, but if you don't know, I'm not going to tell you yet. I want you to see how his identity is progressively revealed. And if you think you know who it is, just pretend that you don't. It'll be more fun this way. And if you have access to a Bible right now, I strongly encourage you to open it and follow along. It will be much easier to see how the Servant's identity is revealed. This sermon will be much more toward the "Bible study" side of the spectrum.

We start in chapter 41, this is actually before the Servant Songs begin. Look at verses 8 through 10. God calls Israel his servant, and he promises to be with them, even when their enemies rage against them. Here it seems quite clear that the servant isn't just one individual, but the nation of Israel.

But things seem to shift toward an individual in chapter 42. This is the first Servant Song. The LORD speaks of the Servant he has chosen. The LORD has put his Spirit upon the Servant, and the Servant "will bring forth justice to the nations" (42:1). Verse 3 speaks of his gentleness, how

“a bruised reed he will not break,  
and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;  
he will faithfully bring forth justice.”

“Justice” is a key word in this first Servant Song. Another key word is “nations,” which can also be translated “Gentiles.” The Servant will bring justice to the nations, and in verse 6 he is called “a light for the nations.” Then in verse 7 it says that he will “open the eyes that are blind.” This seems to refer to an individual now, not the nation. Maybe it's already obvious to you who this is talking about, or maybe it isn't; I don't really know. If you cheat and look at Matthew 12, it might give you a hint.

But things get complicated later in chapter 42. Remember, God said that his Servant will open the eyes that are blind, but in verse 19 he complains about his servant. He says,

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“Who is blind but my servant,  
or deaf as my messenger whom I send?  
Who is blind as my dedicated one,  
or blind as the servant of the LORD?”

If you thought it was confusing not being able to tell if the servant is an individual or an entire nation, now we can't even tell if God likes his servant or not. He loves his servant, of course, but he's not pleased with him here. At one point the servant opens the eyes of the blind, and at another point the servant is the blind one. How can that be? You'll see when we reveal the identity of the Servant.

Over the next few chapters there are several more references to the servant. In 43:10 it's clear that the title “servant” refers to a plurality again, because Yahweh says to his servant, “You are my witnesses.” That's plural, “witnesses,” not, “witness.”

And then there are several places where Israel or Jacob is identified again as the LORD's “servant.” And the name “Israel,” by the way, is the special name that God gave to Jacob after they wrestled in the middle of the night (Gen. 32:28), so “Israel” and “Jacob” are often used interchangeably. Usually the nation is called “Israel,” but sometimes the name “Jacob” is used instead.

And there are several more verses where Israel or Jacob is referred to as the LORD's servant. I'll run through them, because I want you to hear the way that God speaks of Israel as his servant. In 44:1, God says,

“But now hear, O Jacob my servant,  
Israel whom I have chosen!”

And in 44:2 he says, “Fear not, O Jacob my servant.”  
In 44:21 God says,

“Remember these things, O Jacob,  
and Israel, for you are my servant;  
I formed you; you are my servant;  
O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me.”

In 45:4 he says,

“For the sake of my servant Jacob,  
and Israel my chosen,  
I call you by your name,  
I name you, though you do not know me.”

Finally, in 48:20 he says, “The LORD has redeemed his servant Jacob!”

In chapters 41 through 48 there are eight times when the title servant is specifically attached to the names Israel or Jacob.

Now we went through that quick little survey, because something interesting happens in chapter 49. In case you forgot, that's the text for today. In verse 3 Yahweh says, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.” That's pretty similar to all the verses we just heard. But in verse 5 the Servant says,

“And now the LORD says,  
he who formed me from the womb to be his servant,

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to bring Jacob back to him;  
and that Israel might be gathered to him.”

So the Servant has been called “Israel,” but he is also on a mission to restore Israel. Do you see the confusion? The Servant is called Israel, and he is sent on a mission to restore Israel. What do we make of that? In Bible study this is the place where I stop and let you try to figure it out, even if it means a minute or two of silence. But this is a sermon, and it won’t work very well here, so I’m going to have to tell you. Just like the title “servant” sometimes refers to the nation of Israel and sometimes refers to an individual, so also the name “Israel” sometimes refers to the nation of Israel, and sometimes it refers to an individual person. There was a time in Genesis when the name Israel belonged to one man—the patriarch Jacob. And Isaiah teaches us that another time was on the horizon when the name Israel would again belong to just one man.

We’ll come back to that idea, but I want to introduce you to the last two servant songs, because they help clarify who, exactly, this one man is.

The third Servant Song is in chapter 50, verses 4-9. Verses 5 and 6 should give us some insight into who the Servant is:

The Lord GOD has opened my ear,  
and I was not rebellious;  
I turned not backward.  
I gave my back to those who strike,  
and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard;  
I hid not my face  
from disgrace and spitting.”

The Servant is obedient to God by suffering violence, but he is not left in disgrace. He says in verses 7 and 8,

“But the Lord GOD helps me;  
therefore I have not been disgraced;  
therefore I have set my face like a flint,  
and I know that I shall not be put to shame.  
He who vindicates me is near.”

Finally, the Servant Songs reach a climax and conclusion with the fourth song. It runs from chapter 52, verse 13, through the end of chapter 53. And it’s almost impossible to pick out just two or three key verses here. It’s all about how the Servant suffers.

“He was despised and rejected” (53:3).

“He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (53:4).

“He was wounded for our transgressions . . .  
and with his stripes we are healed” (53:5).

“He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,  
yet he opened not his mouth;  
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,  
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,  
so he opened not his mouth” (53:7).

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“They made his grave with the wicked  
and with a rich man in his death,  
although he had done no violence,  
and there was no deceit in his mouth” (53:9).

The LORD’s Servant suffers violence in order to save us from our sins. He is a lamb sacrificed for the sins of his people. This is one of the passages that forms the background for John the Baptist’s proclamation, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). We see very clearly now that the Servant is Jesus.

So sometimes the title “servant” in Isaiah refers to the nation of Israel, especially when God is complaining about how blind his servant is. But other times it refers to Jesus, especially when it speaks of the Servant restoring his people, suffering for our iniquities, or being a light to the nations.

So let’s look back at chapter 49. This is a sermon given by the Servant for the world to hear. These words might as well be in red, because these are Jesus’ words.

And look who he addresses.

“Listen to me, O coastlands,  
and give attention, you peoples from afar” (49:1).

Jesus is preaching to the nations. He is preaching to the Gentiles.

He was named from his mother’s womb. We recall Matthew 1(:21), where the angel tells Joseph that the child in Mary’s womb shall be called Jesus, “for he will save his people from their sins.”

In verse 2 Jesus says, “He made my mouth like a sharp sword.” His Word is his weapon. In verse 4 we see the suffering of the servant.

“But I said, ‘I have labored in vain;  
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;  
yet surely my right is with the LORD,  
and my recompense with my God.’ ”

It might give us pause to hear Jesus complain about what he has to do. But this illustrates his suffering. He never wavers from what he has to do, but he suffers agony in every way, even the feeling of failure and rejection. He even cries from the cross, “**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**” (Matt. 27:46). Despite being rejected and despised, he is faithful to the very end, and he trusts that his Father will raise him from the dead by the Holy Spirit. He does this for the purpose of restoring his people Israel.

This is where we see the connection between Israel as Yahweh’s servant and Jesus as Yahweh’s Servant. Jesus stands in the place of Israel. This is why he actually bears the name “Israel.” He stands in the place of Israel. He does what they failed to do. He keeps the Law where they failed. He resists the devil where Israel gave into temptation (Matt. 4:1-11). He fulfills all righteousness on Israel’s behalf so that he might restore them to God. We can refer to Jesus as “Israel reduced to one.” Just as Israel once consisted of just one man, Jacob, so, again, it consists of just one man, Jesus. There is no Israel outside of Jesus. Jesus is the fulfillment of all the promises God made to Israel. He might actually look like much less than what God had promised, especially when he’s hanging dead on a cross. This does not look like a restoration of David’s kingdom. But he is truly far more than anyone could have imagined, because he fulfills the promises to Israel, not in a temporal earthly kingdom, but in his perfect and eternal new

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creation. He gathers Israel into the eternal Promised Land. The expectations the Jews at Jesus' time had for him were simply too small. They were too limited in the magnitude of the blessing, and they were limited in who the blessings are for.

So Yahweh says to his Son and Servant Jesus,

“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant  
to raise up the tribes of Jacob  
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;  
I will make you as a light for the nations,  
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (49:6).

Saving one nation is too little a thing. God's salvation is for all people of all places. This is not a new concept in the New Testament. The salvation of Gentiles, and their full inclusion into the Israel of God, is well-established in the Old Testament as well. There is no Israel apart from Jesus, but everyone who belongs to Christ is a full member of Israel. It's a matter of faith. It always has been, and it always will be.

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Earth is a deeply divided place. So God sends his Servant to restore his people and gather believers from every nation. He makes us one with Christ and, therefore, one with one another through him.

The Son of God took the form of a servant (Phil. 2:7). Consider this: he did this not only to serve God the Father, but he did this to serve you. He did this to gather you into himself—the true Israel of God. In him we have every blessing God has promised. We have the forgiveness of sins. We have the promise of the resurrection from the dead to eternal life. And we are heirs of his eternal kingdom. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.