



Sermon Transcript December 9, 2018

Behold the Servant! Too Light A Thing Isaiah 49:1-13

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on December 9, 2018 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Steve Durgin. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
Isaiah 49:1-13

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 ^uas 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; because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”

⁸ Thus says the Lord: “In a time of favor I have answered you; in a day of salvation I have helped you; I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages, ⁹ saying to the prisoners, ‘Come out,’ to those who are in darkness, ‘Appear.’ They shall feed along the ways; on all bare heights shall be their pasture; ¹⁰ they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them, for he who has pity on them ^gwill lead them, and by springs of water will guide them.¹¹ And I will make all my mountains a road, and my highways shall be raised up. ¹² Behold, these shall come from afar, and behold, these from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Syene.” ¹³ Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people and will have compassion on his afflicted.

Introduction

“Listen up!” Says the Lord. Isaiah 49:1. “Listen to me, O Coastlands, and give attention, you peoples from afar.”

This is the servant speaking, the one who God promised would bring to fulfillment and to fruition all that Israel was longing for. Who is he addressing, church? (I’m asking.) “The coastlands” And “people from afar.” You have to speak pretty loud if you’re gonna reach them. This is not a whisper, nor does it stop short at the ears of all Israel, but is a worldwide proclamation. And what does he say? Well he says several things that ought to make us listen to him.

Look to the end of VERSE 1:

“The Lord called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name. 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.”

These are the qualifications of the servant: the servant has been prepared from birth, called from the beginning, groomed precisely for the work of God. The servant says that God himself named him at birth, in essence, claiming him as his own son, and, in Hebrew tradition, designating the kind of work that is ahead of him.

Moreover, the servant is compared to a sword— not just any sword but a sharp sword, and an arrow— not just any arrow but a polished arrow. In both cases quality craftsmanship is drawn out. The servant does not come with weapons— he is the weapon. He does not hold a sword in hand; his mouth—his word is the sword, and *he* is held in the father’s hand. He made *me* a polished arrow, and twice we see that this weapon is being concealed.

Look at VERSE 2. About the sword he says, “in the shadow of his hand he hid me” about the arrow he says ‘in his quiver he hid me away.” VERSE 1: a child in the womb; VERSE 2: a sword in the shadow of his hand, and arrow hidden away in his quiver.

The whole picture is one of preparation, and the deliberate, masterful hand of God is knitting the child together in the womb, sharpening the sword before battle, polishing the arrow before it flies for its mark. And before this arrow takes flight, before the sword is unsheathed, before this child sees the light of day the Lord speaks over him VERSE 3:

“And he said to me, ‘you are my servant, Israel in whom I will be glorified.”

These are tender words. Words of certainty and promise. My child, you will succeed. What could go wrong? And yet we hear in the very next verse the words of this servant back to the Lord.

VERSE 4: “But I said, “I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.”

Is the servant questioning? Does his mission daunt him? Is this pristine, God-forged weapon second-guessing himself? It sure seems like it. There is a sense of frustration and futility— what’s the point? This was all for nothing.

If you haven’t been with us we have been hearing a lot this fall and now winter, about a figure called the Servant, sent by God to restore the people of Israel with whom he had established a relationship. But here we have a glimpse into this character’s difficulty.

Now, if you’re looking ahead, the servant only says this for a moment. He lands right back in the certainty of what the LORD spoke over him and agrees with him and says (see the end of VERSE 4) “yet surely my right is with the Lord, and my recompense with God.” In other words, ‘Victory is as good as mine, and I’m going to do what God made me to do.’

But we still have to ask, “What task is so great that even the chosen servant, called and named and sharpened and polished by God would say this sort of thing even for a moment? “I have labored in vain. I’ve spent my strength for nothing.”

Just because the Lord calls you to something doesn’t make it easy. Can you relate? Even for the spectacular, long-awaited servant, this task is daunting. We might be talking about Mission Impossible.

So what is this task? What is this servant sent to do which is so hard that even he could be frustrated?

Well the answer is simple. It has been the cry of God’s heart from Isaiah 40-48: “Bring back my son!” Bring back Israel, who used to go by another name, Jacob. Bring my son back to me.

Ahhhh.... There it is. Now we see how the servant can be so frustrated. You have to deal with *them*. I don’t know if you read the Bible but Israel was difficult, y’all. And they weren’t just failures, missing the mark here and there with good intentions. They were rebellious, stubborn, willfully sinning against God. God famously called them a stiff-necked people. The sort of people you try to help them and you end up burned. You ever have that happen where you reach out to someone and you get hit for it?

I can feel this way with my clients at work, sometimes. I work with some folks that struggle with drug addiction and severe mental illness, and sometimes, even though I'm the only one cheering for them bringing a bit of positivity into their lives, they blame me for everything bad that happens, they get mad at *me* when I might be the only person in the picture who is there to help them. And it's humbling in my frustration to realize that's how God loves me. Even when refuse his care. Even when I sabotage the game plan. That's how God loves his people. That's how he loves Israel, his son.

This is the task of the Servant. Or at least, we've been told as much so far. But something more happens here. Read with me in VERSE 5 and following.

“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—the same LORD says, ‘It is too light a thing that you should raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.’”

It is too light a thing. Too light a thing. Too small. Too insignificant.

This thing which to us seems impossible, is not enough from God's perspective. It wouldn't be enough to save merely Israel and get back his son, because his son was always meant to reach out to the whole world with his loving embrace! Israel was supposed to do the will of God on earth, was supposed to be his Servant sent out as a light to draw and lead all peoples to a restored relationship with God. And as the Bible makes clear, this Servant came and lived a perfect life of love for God and obedience to God, not so that Israel wouldn't have to, but so that they actually could!

So many Christians today make this same mistake, thinking that God only came to save a remnant by the skin of their teeth, and that all they ought to do in this life is wait around for heaven. They say, Jesus came and lived a perfect life so that I don't have to! But Jesus came and lived a perfect life so that you could! It was his obedience that gave you access to God. Jesus made a way, not just for Israel to come back to him, but for Israel to be the witness to God's saving love in the world. So that Israel would so live that they would win over the diverse peoples of the world with God's love, despite having different languages, cultures, customs, and traditions, draw in by the love and joy and power of God at work in his people.

Thus says the LORD, (VERSE 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; because of the LORD who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”

The Bible claims that Jesus came and was hated because of who he represented, because of who he was like, because of who he was: God. He didn't come into the world to tell us all that we're just fine, as we are, doin' whatever we think best, as many of us arrogantly wish. He came into the world like an arrow, like a sharp sword, he had some things to say, and his Word pierced people to the heart. But this part isn't about him being hated by the world generally. It says what, Church, in VERSE 7? We was “abhorred by the _____?” Nation. Nation singular. Israel. His own people rejected him.

You know a lot of us, when Christmas comes around, when we get into the spirit of celebrating Advent, celebrating the coming of Jesus I think a lot of us wrongly assume that we *like* him, and that we'd like everything he has to say. I mean I'd love to think I'd like him, but when I read Isaiah I'm not so sure. Something tells me that if Jesus in the flesh came to one of our Advent services we'd get pretty upset.

He might cut us to heart with how we spend money on ourselves at Christmas, with how little we think of the poor and the homeless, those on the margins, the foreigners who are working so hard to stay afloat and adjust to this country, with the “nations,” if you will, the diverse peoples that his people were meant and sent to serve from the beginning.

As far as I can see Christmas is liable to be a time when we give stuff to those we like most and love most. But what's the problem with that? The people we like most tend to be most like us. People tend to associate with people who are in similar situations. And the rich tend to give gifts to the rich. And so the people who have the most give to each other the most, without much thought to those who need it the most.

My guess is that if Jesus walked into this sanctuary he would say some things that feel like the tip of an arrow and the edge of a sword. We would wince at his words. That's how his chosen people react to him. But interestingly, how do the kings and princes of the world respond as Isaiah goes on? (VERSE 7). They bow down. These kings, who are used to being bowed to are so compelled by this Servant figure that they bow down. The one who was just-before called the “servant of rulers” is being served by the rulers of earth. Why do suppose that is?

I think Isaiah makes clear that it's because he's succeeded in his mission. The Servant has come, his light has come into the world, and his people have become the Servant and the Light that they were called and saved to be. And now, the leaders of the world have taken notice.

This is Isaiah's picture of the nations, which, by the way, included Israel's enemies (Babylon, Assyria, and some very scary, conquering powers) recognizing the God as the true God, the one who made everything and made it good; who loves not just his tiny people named Israel, but who loves the whole world and wants to reach the world through them. And this can only happen if God gets his people back. (See VERSE 5) He sent this Servant to "bring Jacob back to him." Back from what? Church?

Sin. Slavery to every dysfunction you can imagine, all stemming ultimately from a godless life.

God was not focused primarily on bringing this Jewish community out from under the heavy hand of Babylon and back to Palestine. God wanted to bring his people back to himself. It was to bring Israel back to the conviction that Yahweh was sovereign in the world, back to finding strength in him, to believing in his superiority over other so-called gods, to believing in God's loving commitment to them. "Return to me!" Yahweh says in Isaiah 44:22.

And if they do, the result is nothing short of staggering. Isaiah shows us what salvation looks like:

"In a time of favor I have answered you; in a day of salvation I have helped you; I will keep you and give you, [that is, Jesus,] as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages, saying to the prisoners, 'Come out,' to those who are in darkness, 'Appear.' They shall feed along the ways; on all bare heights shall be their pasture; they shall not hunger or thirst, nothing will harm them..."

What does it look like when God's people get right with God?

It doesn't look like sitting around, waiting for heaven. It doesn't look like people who see the poor, the homeless, and the marginalized in their land and throw up their hands and say, "in this world you will have trouble." For the Servant says, "Take heart, for I have overcome the world!" (Jn. 16) and "Now the prince of this world will be cast out" (Jn. 12:31).

This salvation looks like Jesus reigning in the lives of his people; it looks like his subjects giving away land, money, and security to the poor, advocating for the freedom of the imprisoned, giving visibility to the invisible people of this country—those caught in sex trafficking on the Berlin Turnpike, those who live on the margins in Section 8 housing, those who never make it through the doors of this Church because they would feel so unwelcome, because they are—you name it—Muslim, gender nonconforming, attracted to the same sex... People have any number of reasons to believe that Christians won't

understand or love them. People have plenty of reasons not to join this faith family, some of them born out in their experiences.

But for Isaiah, when God's people get right with God, there is a flood of restoration and justice. Why? Because it's our sin, both corporate and individual, that leads to the conditions in which people can be poor, homeless, hungry, or stuck in the revolving door of our broken criminal justice system.

If I had to summarize the logic of this passage:

- God wants to restore the world
- God set apart Israel to be his servant in the world, doing his will
- Israel failed. A lot. They could not or would not live out their calling.
- So God sent a representative to live out Israel's calling. *And* make a way for Israel to be the Servant they were called to be.
- Which means God using Israel to gather the diverse peoples of the world into one family of faith.
- How? Love and justice. "Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself." "He has told you, O humankind, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Or, in Isaiah's words... "Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause" (Isa. 1:17). Here you see love and justice come from the same heart of goodness.

"Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting **everything** that stands against love."

Church could it be that like the Israelites you stand against love? Are you a hindrance to the kingdom? God says in verse 11 "And I will make all my mountains a road, and my highways shall be raised up." So are you on the way or in the way?

Let me make myself clear, when Jesus is given "as a covenant to the people" in VERSE 8 the land prospers, the poor are given money and land, the prisoners are given freedom, and visibility to the invisible—in other words, those who are on the margins of society, who feel they have no place, no security, no future, are brought by his Servant, God's people, into the light of love and fellowship and prosperity.

Church, God has made a road for all peoples to come to him.

If we don't feed the hungry. We are in the way. If we don't give away your money and part with your comforts so that the homeless can have a place to live, we are in the way. If we don't work for the freedom of prisoners, oh my Lord, so many of whom shouldn't be there, and who are there because of what this fallen world handed to them, Church, we are in the way. If we don't seek out the people in this community and even within these walls who feel invisible and small and voiceless because of their age, class, sex, gender, sexual orientation, occupation, or race, then Church, we're in the way. We stand against God's corrective love. We stand against justice and restoration.

But praise be to God, his Servant Jesus has come! "In a time of favor God has answered us! In a day of salvation he has helped us!"

He has come that we might turn from our wicked ways and acknowledge him. He has come that through us, he might be glorified. He has come that Israel, his precious son, might come back to him! And as if that wasn't enough, 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." This is where you come in, Church!

VERSE 9: "They shall feed along the ways; on all bare heights shall be their pasture," — HOW? The Church feeds them. Israel is restored by this Servant to be the Servant they were meant to be, and just as the Servant Jesus entered into our suffering and darkness, so we are sent into the world, entering into the struggles of others, correcting everything that stands against love.

God sent Jesus into the world to set a people on fire for the glory of his name and the good of his creation, to set them free from the sin that entangled them, to empower them by his indwelling holy Spirit to do in them what they could not do before—to win over people from every tribe, tongue, and nation by showing them his love and his great salvation.

So, are you on the way or in the way? Your actions will answer that question for you.

There are **two sinful ways** that evangelical Christians tend to respond to God's word, whenever God clearly calls them to seek justice.

We could say, "Well all of that justice stuff is about life after death." Until then we're just sort of hanging on, waiting to die and go to heaven. Which totally misses what Jesus did to help corrupt tax collectors, government officials, the rich young man, the pagans, prostitutes, prisoners, lepers, the disabled, and the hungry. This view sees no conflict between living a comfortable life in a suburb of CT and allowing people next door in

Hartford to suffer under the forces chronic homelessness, poorly coordinated social services, crappy schools—you name it. Somehow, it's okay to let all of that persist because heaven is coming. And God will take of all that.

I am hard pressed to think of a more evil perspective. This is that wicked, faithless spirit that says, "Go, be warmed and clothed and fed," but does nothing to help. It is those wicked people whom Jesus challenged, in Matthew 25:31-46.

MATTHEW 25:31-46. ³¹ "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' ⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers,[f] you did it to me.' ⁴¹ "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

JAMES 2:14-17. ¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good[b] is that? ¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

I hope I don't have say more about that.

The second evil way to respond is to agree that we should do something but act like that problems are basically unsolvable. We consider the poor, the homeless, the mentally ill,

the systemically disadvantaged minorities in our land today and we throw up our hands and say, rhetorically, “What can be done?”

For the people of God, the Servant of the world, the question “What can be done?” Should never be a rhetorical question. Not only can the Lord restore his people Israel to faithfulness, justice, and righteousness, but it’s too light a thing to stop there!

It is too light a thing for the Lord to save only the Jews because his love is bigger than the world. It is too light a thing for the servant to bring back God’s son, because it has always been his heart to draw the whole world into his family.

There is a right way to respond to this passage. Believe and celebrate.

We do Christmas, not merely to celebrate that Jesus came, but to celebrate what he came to do. God sent his Son so that we could become his children, and be brought back to him. God sent his Servant so that we could be his servant in the world and spread his salvation to the end of the earth. That salvation means justice for the oppressed and love for the broken.

If you doubt that God can keep you from sinning and empower you to live a faithful, loving, servant life, can I just say something? It would be too light a thing for God to merely bring you back as his child. He can do that, AND use you to bring his love into the lives of others.

God is sending a servant so he can get back his son. That’s how he sees his people, Israel, as his very own child. That’s how he sees you.

Sermon Title: Too Light a Thing

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Sermon Date: December 9, 2018

COMMUNITY GROUPS



Getting To Know Me Questions

1. What is one of your earliest Christmas memories?
2. What do you like to do to make sure that you keep your focus on Christ during Christmas? What do you find most distracting during this season?
3. What did you take from the sermon on Sunday?



Diving Into The Word

4. Read Isaiah 49:8-13. As a group, list the images that Isaiah uses to help us imagine his salvation. Tell each other which image most sticks out to you and why you think it does.
5. Based on these pictures, Jesus came to bring restoration and justice (e.g., the hungry are fed, the homeless get an inheritance). How do you think Jesus intends to accomplish restoration and justice in the Greater Hartford area?
6. Read Isaiah 49:5-6. Despite how challenging it is to bring all of Israel back into right relationship with God and each other, God seems to promise even more. He calls his people to be a "light for the nations, that [his] salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (49:6). How would you like to see this happen in your life? In our church?



Taking It Home

7. What is one thing you are taking with you from your discussion?
8. Share a prayer request with the group based on what you talked about from Isaiah.