

Letting the Light Out  
Isaiah 49.1-7  
Epiphany 2A  
January 15, 2017  
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It didn't start with Oprah, but for the benefit of collective experience, we'll start there today. It must have been when she told us all to read *The Secret* that it reached maximum impact—the Oprah-Deepak-Eckhart Tolle-manifest your best life movement. People everywhere began making vision boards and adjusting negative language to positive and putting hope in the law of attraction to draw more light and love and goodness into their ordinary experiences. With the power of her media empire, she gave us language and strategies for changing our lives. More than anything else, she tapped into the popular imagination with a word of hope—life can be different, you can access the inherent beauty and goodness that is within you, you possess the capacity to turn from the path you are on toward the better path that has been waiting for you all along. Millions of people bought the books, downloaded the meditation podcasts, and cut the inspiring images out of magazines in an effort to hold onto the hope that life can be different and better and something like right.

It didn't start with Oprah because these are ancient ways and ancient words, and I don't think she's wrong to gather them all together and present them as a connected teaching. In fact, I think this movement of manifesting your best life and ultimately turning from the wrong path onto the best path sounds a lot like what John the baptizer was imagining when he called people to repent and believe. Repent—turn and change direction. The prophets beat this same drum in calling people back to the path of God, and they also used the same ancient technique of speaking possibility into imagination—reminding people of the goodness marked in them at creation, calling people back to the better life God has dreamed for them, speaking grace and peace into people's lives and then watching grace and peace take hold, telling the old story in a fresh way that people might hear. There is a lot of good built into the invitation of living one's best life.

However, I think there is an incompleteness to the pop-culture message as we have processed these teachings for decade after decade, and it influences the way we approach our sacred texts. Unlike the call of the prophets, the call of the culture has focused our attention solely on our individual lives, and the questions they ask don't go far enough. What do I want? What do I need? What do I imagine for myself? What can I release? What can I take on? Not a bad set of questions and not a bad starting place at

all, but they are only a starting place. And the consequence of decades of asking questions like these as a nation (and we have all been influenced by pop-psychology whether we've read the books or not) is that we have ultimately come to believe that our lives aren't connected. Our popular imagination is crippled by the thought that my life is my responsibility and your life is your responsibility. I'm on my path, you are on yours, and what happens on my path doesn't impact anyone but me. And maybe...it doesn't take long before I am taking credit for the good on my path and thinking, "what happens on your path is your fault."

In fact, these individualized efforts to get onto the better path have really turned into yet another wrong path, particularly within the church, because we have mistakenly not recognized the fullness of our calling and the connectedness of the invitation. That's why we need to listen to the ancient call of the prophets reaching out to us today to pull us more fully onto the path God has laid out for us. We read a poem this morning from Isaiah 49—the prophet is reminding his audience of a call that precedes life. This called one was created to strengthen, to gather, to raise up, to restore. And his poem is a prophetic calling for Israel to remember the inherent goodness marked in them by God at the beginning of all things, to turn from the wrong path and return to the true path, and to remember and return as a people who will be a light to the nations. The call isn't for individuals to personally step onto the path of God for private, autonomous salvation. The call is for a people to turn and return together for the sake of the whole world. Turn and return to be light in darkness. Turn and return to say to those in darkness, "Be free!"

The prophet is speaking to a people about who they are, together. Paul Hanson writes of "the struggle for the heart of Israel" in Isaiah 48 and 49. The question is not about personal path and individual salvation but about the people of God joining together as "the object of God's compassionate justice." Hear that. Can our highly individualized ears hear the difference? This is when it helps to be Southern! The prophet is not just calling you and you and you, he is calling "all y'all" to come and follow the way of God. In saying "yes" to this call to return, the people accept that "Israel's responsibilities extend beyond its borders to reach out to the nations of the earth."<sup>1</sup>

There is a flow or an interplay in these chapters of Isaiah and in our life today between personal path and outer good. It starts with individual call and remembering and then transforms God's people "to be an instrument of God's saving acts on behalf of the whole world." The call doesn't stop at the individual. And it doesn't stop at the group.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul D. Hanson, *Interpretation: Isaiah 40-66*, pp. 126-131

The call is like a snowball that grows and builds, gathering more and more into the Way for the good of all the earth's nations.

And the Way, as we read in the second half of verse 4, is taking on God's cause. And the word translated as "cause" here is "mishpat" and is translated throughout other parts of Isaiah as "justice." Hansen writes, "mispat is the order of compassionate justice that God has created and upon which the wholeness of the universe depends." What we hear as a really old poem is actually overflowing with excitement and energy. This isn't just "remember God created you and calls you." This is a reminder that God has created and called you to a particular and peculiar life in the cause of God—the compassionate justice that God intends for all people and all places and all things and all times. God has created and called you, together as a people, to be light in darkness in such a way that the compassionate justice of God spreads through the world around you and beyond you. You were born for this!

It is a call to personal wholeness (and that's where you do figure out the stuff of your own journey and own giftedness for life) which spreads to community wholeness (who are we as a people sharing life together? how does our giftedness overlap into a sense of corporate call and identity?) and then leads to wholeness for the good world God created. It's terribly exciting and terribly difficult all at once, and in just a couple of breaths we may be thinking, "There's no way I can participate in something that big." When we talk about my life being linked to yours in such a way that the entire order of the world is changed, anxiety is just as likely to spike as curiosity is. And that anxiety takes a couple of forms—some folks within the community will balk at the notion that we're really supposed to take on the cause of God's compassionate justice, and some of us will be tempted to run and hide from the calling we may be feeling in our bones.

Several months ago we told the story of the prophet Elijah who ends up hiding in a cave after he has been chased away for proclaiming God's cause. We acknowledged our own tendency to hide in the face of criticism and what we perceive to be really hard work. We know stories like the prophet Jeremiah who ends up tossed into the mud at the bottom of a cistern after speaking the words of God's compassionate justice. We don't want our lives to be any harder than they already are, so we aren't so sure we want to follow the way of the prophets. Of this response Paul Hansen observes, "For the human servant called to serve the world-embracing purposes of God, one of the chief temptations is to scale back the assignment of human dimensions...But at such moments, God answers complaint with a renewal of the commission and even an enlarging of its compass."

Let's hear it again: "For the human servant called to serve the world-embracing purposes of God, one of the chief temptations is to scale back the assignment of

human dimensions...But at such moments, God answers complaint with a renewal of the commission and even an enlarging of its compass."

I feel this, don't you? When I am showing up, awake, doing the work of being true to who God has shaped me to be and staying as close as I can to the path God has laid out before me, I feel the capacity in my calling and within the call on this congregation to speak truth to power, to organize around peacemaking values, to be a force in our world for kindness and justice. I feel it like a pulse within me—my passionate response to join the cause of God's compassionate justice. Then in the next breath, I recognize I don't have the thick skin that ancient prophets surely had. I'm ready to shout "Uncle" long before a mob with fiery torches is chasing me to the edge of town or dropping me deep in a well. When I speak of what I perceive is a real call (mine and ours) to be a light for those in darkness in some very real, very practical, very difficult ways, it isn't long before someone does push back and tell me they don't have the same vision. And even if we manage to disagree well about the ways God calls us to live and move and have our being in the world, I still feel myself shrink when the way of God's cause feels like it costs too much for me. And I very quickly doubt the call I have felt burning so strongly within me. And I actively work to scale back the dimensions of the assignment I previously knew was coming to me from the Divine.

Do you have this instinct in you? To cut and run when things get hard? Or to set your life up in such a way that ease and comfort and soft edges are pretty much all you know? To vision board your life in such a way that very little is demanded of you and only the best and easiest ways become your ways? I try to rewrite my story sometimes, and there is very much a part of me that wants to put blinders on and only focus on my own best life without regarding anyone else's. But I am not shaped that way, and to deny that my story is forever linked to your story is to accept an incomplete life. And who wants that? My story is linked to yours, and our story is linked to the cause of God. I am still learning the implications of this connected path even though I know it's real.

I know this much of my own story: When I try to hide from the path God has called me to walk—that is, hiding from my truest self—I always find that God is nudging me back onto it. God hears me cry out, "This is too hard. And it hurts when people don't see what I see or hear what I hear. So call someone else to this." And for whatever reason, God won't accept my resignation. Instead, God answers my complaint with a renewal of my calling. And the vision I have glimpsed for my life and for this congregation grows bigger. You have to do this same work of listening, crying out, and discerning, too. The way your call looks individually will be different than mine, but there is and most certainly will be a cord that connects our call as a people. We may be tempted to cut and run when there is anxiety and difficulty here. We may be tempted to shirk out

calling and wish some other group would take it on so that our collective life could be soft and easy.

But God won't accept our resignation. God continues to renew our calling here. That means when we give ourselves to the cause of God's compassionate justice we go from hosting kindness corners and simply passing out coffee and smiles to anyone who needs them to hosting conversations about what's broken with our systems of alleged justice and mass incarceration. And as soon as we open ourselves to a bigger set of questions about how we as a people might be light in the darkness, I start getting emails from you with ideas about going into prisons and hosting a city-wide summit around race and poverty and social action.

When you are doing the work of discerning the fullness of who you are called to be, and you feel it all the way into your bones, give yourself fully to that awareness and that Way not just for your own sake but for mine, too. And when you and I figure out how our lives are intertwined in the cause of God, we won't be afraid to step out together on a path that compels us to care for the whole world. God will use you and the story of your path to call me back onto mine. God uses you to renew my commission when I want to run from it and tie on a barista apron. We are being knitted together as a people, you see, and God has designs on this place even when we doubt our capacity to make a difference in this old world.

From the beginning of all things, our scriptures tell us, God has believed in God's human creation. God has believed that we will rise up to embrace the fullness of our humanity and partner each other and with God to make the world whole. May you enter this calling without fear. May you receive the strength and blessing the prophet proclaimed. May you move fully into your calling as people of light to the nations. In the work we do every single day to live all of this out, may we discover together how we have been formed as a people who bring out the Divine wholeness for all, forever renewed as activists in the cause of God's compassionate justice, brothers and sisters of the light. Amen.