

Eighth Sunday in Epiphanytide

Isaiah 49:8-16a; Psalm 131; Matthew 6:24-34; I Corinthians 4:1-5

Isaiah 49:8-16a is the conclusion of the second Servant Song in the book of Isaiah (the others being Isaiah 42:1-6, 50:4-9 and 52:13-53:12). In the first seven verses of Isaiah 49, the Servant identifies himself as being a remnant of Israel (either one person or a few faithful people) who has been called by God (vss. 1-4) and given a two-fold mission: first, “to bring Jacob back to (God)” (vs. 5), and to be “a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth” (vs. 6b). Former “servants” of Yahweh like Moses, Isaiah and Jeremiah were called to work for the liberation and salvation of Israel (Exod. 4:10-17; Isa. 6:5-7; Jer. 1:6-10). But God’s unique Servant is to become “a light to the nations”. He becomes such a light to the whole world by introducing the world to Yahweh and by working for a society of justice, equity and relationality under God’s covenant of grace-filled love. Thus, the Servant fulfills, in his actions, the ultimate call to Abraham (Gen. 12:3; 22:18) and to Israel (Exod. 19:5-6) of bringing about the transformation of all the nations of the world.

It is in the light of these first seven verses that this Sunday’s Old Testament lesson unfolds. The prophet declares, “Thus says the Lord: In a time of favor I have answered you, on a day of salvation I have helped you; I have kept you and given you 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, “Show yourselves.” They shall feed along the ways, on all the bare heights shall be their pasture; they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them. And I will turn all my mountains into a road, and my highways shall be raised up. Lo, these shall come from far away, and lo, these from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Syene” (49:8-12).

To begin the Servant’s work of being “a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (vs. 6b), God first acts to call out of bondage God’s own people. The first task of the Servant is “to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages” (vs. 8b). This he will do by calling forth God’s chosen people from the prisons and darkness of other nations (vs. 9). They will come forth from the Babylonian Empire on a second exodus. But unlike the first Exodus in which they hungered and thirsted in the wilderness and stumbled over rocky terrain (Exod. 15:22-25; 16:1-36; 17:1-7; Num. 11:1-35; 20:2-13), in this second Exodus “they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down. (God) will turn all my mountains into a road, and my highways shall be raised up (i.e., smoothed out)” (49:10-11). Thus, the exiles’ return will be smooth and without the struggle of the wilderness wanderings.

Most remarkably, Isaiah prophesies, the returning exiles “shall come from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Syene” (vs. 12). It will not only be from Babylon that the returning Israelites will come. They will come from all over the world, returning home from wherever they may have been scattered in the world. The most intriguing reference in this passage is the statement that they will even come “from the land of Syene”. Syene was a city in southern Egypt, at the Nile River’s first cataract. What was significant about that city to Jews, however, was that in the 5th century BCE, a Jewish colony had been established on the island of Elephantine in the Nile River, which was opposite the city of Syene. For the prophet to mention

that Hebrew people would come from Syene meant that even many of the Elephantine community were to return to Israel. This reference to Syene meant that, by the writing of this prophecy, the existence of the Elephantine community was known by the Jews and was worthy of note! So, to summarize, the prophet Isaiah envisions Jews who had been exiled by or who had fled from the Babylonian holocaust 70 years earlier, returning to Jerusalem from Babylonia and Persia (“north” across the Fertile Crescent), from the Turkish peninsula (“from the west”) and from Egypt (“Syene”) as a liberated people in a second return to build a Promised Land!

The prophet continues. “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 suffering ones. But Zion said, ‘The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.’ Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands” (49:13-16a).

The Israelite exiles in Babylonia despair of ever becoming free again and returning home. But the prophet has just promised not only them but all who fled Babylon’s wrath that they will indeed be set free and will return to Jerusalem and the Promised Land again. In fact, he likens their return to the Exodus itself. But the captives are dubious. “The Lord has forsaken us”, they say. “The Lord has forgotten us; (therefore, we will not return)”.

Is that so, the prophet asks? “Can a woman forget the baby presently suckling at her breast? Yet, there is greater likelihood of a mother forgetting her nursing baby than there is for God to forget you and your captivity”. And because God will not and cannot forget, if God says you will be liberated and will return to the Promised Land, you will be freed from Babylon or the other nations in which you have taken refuge, and God will bring you home! You can bet on it!

There are two nuances in this passage of promise which are particularly intriguing – but they are not obvious to us when we read the passage in English. The first nuance is that the word translated “Zion” (the Hebrew *watt’omer*) is in a feminine form. So look at what the prophet has done in the Hebrew. The issue is, “Will God indeed return captive Israel to the Promised Land? Will God return the exiles to their mother, Zion?” Well, would a mother forget the child at her breast? No, she wouldn’t! Well, even if she did, God, the eternal mother, would not forget you exiles! The author has abandoned the usual figure of God as the embodiment of paternal love for the image of God as maternal love! Mother God will not abandon you (even if – as hard as it is to believe – a human mother might abandon her nursing child) but will bring you to your mother, Jerusalem, where you will be suckled and loved! It is an intriguing play of words in the Hebrew.

The second nuance is equally powerful. The final words of this prophecy are “See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands” (vs. 16a). In these words, the author both changes the metaphor and yet strengthens the original metaphor. God, through this prophet, is declaring to the fearful Israelite exiles that she (God) cannot forget you captives because your very names are “inscribed (or better yet, in Hebrew, “engraved”) on the palms of (God’s) hands”. You are cut into the palms of God’s hands; that is how much you are before God’s very eyes. It is not probable, but it is conceivable that a mother might forget a nursing baby. But God can’t forget you because you are tattooed into her very hands! All she has to do is open her hands – and

there your names are! That is how important both you as an exiled people are to God and how important it is to God that she be faithful to her promise to all of you!

Psalm 131 is a psalm describing what our relationship should be with God. It divides into two parts. The first part (verse 1) reads, “O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high. I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me”. The contentment and peace that this psalmist feels in the presence of God is based upon the certainty that God will be absolutely trustworthy, will be faithful to God’s promises, and will “stand in the gap” for us. The author suggests that we need not seek position, power, prestige or possessions – in fact, to do so is to miss what life with God and within God’s community is all about. Relieved of the perceived necessity of having to assume responsibility for the universe, the psalmist can be about another task. After all, the world got along without us before we were born, and it will somehow cope with our no longer being here to right the world when we die!

The psalmist continues, “But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother, my soul is like the weaned child that is with me” (vs. 2). It is such a beautiful image that is painted here. When we can free ourselves from the sense of our own importance, our relationship with God can take on entirely different dimensions. We can be like a baby who has drunk its full at its mother’s breast, and can there fall asleep, content, secure, at peace. And the mother, having cared for her child, can doze as well in total contentment. Both in their peaceful slumber can be quite vulnerable, but are also totally secure. So we should be with God!

The psalm thus ends, “O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time on and forevermore” (vs. 3). This contented rest in Yahweh, rather than operating on the premise that our good lies only in our own production or importance, is not meant solely for the individual but for all Israel. The nation can be at peace with God.

The problem with people, institutions (including the church), even nations is precisely that “my eyes are raised too high”, that we do “occupy ourselves with things too great for us”. We don’t always need to be the biggest and the best; we do not need to always be ahead of all the rest! Our danger is to become nothing more than a “human doing” rather than a human being. And captured by such ceaseless activity, we can never simply enjoy the presence of God. We can never be still, resting on the breast of God. And, therefore, in our ceaseless competition, we have paid a terribly great price!

Matthew 6:24-34. Jesus talked more about money than any other subject except God! And what he always had to say about money was always related to what he had to say about God. Jesus’ primary message about money is encapsulated in the opening sentences of today’s Gospel lesson.

“No one can serve two masters: Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Money” (Matt. 6:24, NIV).

There is a reason that the NIV capitalizes “Money”. The original Greek actually says, as every Christian well knows, “You cannot serve God and Mammon”. The word “money” (or “wealth”, as in the NRSV) is simply the English translation of the word “Mammon”. Many commentators will tell you that “Mammon” is simply the Aramaic word for “money”. That is true, but there is more to it than that. The word “Mammon” was used throughout the Roman world of Jesus’ time as a god – the god of possessions, property, money, gain and success!

What Jesus is doing here is intentionally creating a dichotomy: No person can love simultaneously the God of Jesus and the God of Money. You have to make a choice which God you will serve, Jesus is in essence saying. The fact is that to love one is to automatically hate the other; to serve one is to, *ipso facto*, despise the other. It is impossible for any human being to center his or her life on possessions and God at the same time, because the two are diametrically opposed to each other. These are two very distinct ways of approaching life that are exclusive to each other! This is Jesus’ primary teaching about money.

It is not that Jesus is saying that money, per se, is evil. He is not saying, “Money is the root of all evil”. As St. Paul put it, “(It is) the *love* of money that is the root of all evil” (I Tim. 6:10). Jesus is saying that what money represents, what it is that any human being accumulating money is tempted to do with it is evil! Money can become as much a god to a person as can God Himself!

What would it mean to you to “make it” in life? For what do you yearn? The author of Proverbs wrote, “Give me neither poverty nor riches, for if I am full, I will deny you and say, “Who is the Lord?”, and if I am poor and steal, I will profane the name of my God” (Prov. 30:8-9).

But the dichotomy is not simply between the rich and the poor and their obsession with money (the rich to gain and hoard more of it or the poor fixated upon their survival by any means). The middle class also are obsessed by money and all that money can buy. The biblical message is that our drive for security, for prestige, for love, even for family is all the service of “Mammon”. That is why the ancients, concerned with being focused upon God, took vows of chastity, poverty and obedience because a fixation upon the gaining of love, wealth and self-determination would so quickly lead to the worship of Mammon. Thus, the struggle for all, Jesus is saying, is between “God and Mammon”. And “no one can serve (these) two masters, for one (must) hate the one (in order to) love the other!”

Having stated the principle, Jesus now gives commentary on the principle: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and body more than clothing” (6:25)? He then gives two examples of that principle.

First, “Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life” (vss. 26-27)?

Second, “Why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of

these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith” (vss. 28-30).

Having given these two examples of both trust and God’s promised protection and sustenance of us, Jesus states his essential argument. “Therefore do not worry saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (vss. 31-33)!

It is important to see what Jesus is saying here and is not saying here. He is not saying, “Be irresponsible. Be irrational. Don’t be proactive about your life, but simply depend upon the “goodness of strangers” for the sustenance of your life.” What he says in verses 25-33 must be examined in the light of the earlier part of his Sermon on the Mount – Matthew 5:1-6:23. What he is saying is “Center your life, its objectives and priorities on simply one thing – “*striving*” for the kingdom of God – “and all these things will be given to you as well” (vs. 33). That is, choose “God” rather than the god “Mammon”, and thus center your life on working for the coming of the reign of God without fretting or worrying about how the needs of your life or your family will be met. And God will work in and through you and your situation so that all your other needs for food, shelter and clothing will be met! The question is, can you trust God to do that?

And how are you to work for the kingdom of God? That which we have already heard as we listened to the Sermon on the Mount tells us how to work for Christ and His Kingdom. “We participate in what God is doing. We love our enemies as God loves God’s enemies. We give aid to the poor and pray and fast in private. We forgive others as God forgives us. We do unto others as we want others to do for us, just as God gives us good gifts. We strive first for God’s reign and restorative justice just as God is caring for creation, including the birds, the lilies, and us. It is never about doing nothing, but always about participating in these caring actions of God’s”.¹

Jesus now brings these insights to their conclusion. “So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today” (6:34)! What should monopolize our actions, our goals and even our identities as human beings? Should it be the striving for the “Mammon” of life – frenetic fixation with power, prestige, possessions, position, protection, passion or parenting? Or should it be working intentionally in the world for the realizing of the justice of God’s kingdom? Whatever we choose, whichever God we choose to serve, there will be constant worries and anxieties about accomplishing our assigned purpose. So live life not worrying about what may occur in the future – because “today’s trouble is enough for today”! And if we live life not fixated upon its troubles, we will find ourselves as children of God steadily drawn toward Christ and the working for his kingdom. For that is what life is meant to be all about!

¹ Glen H. Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006)), pp. 136-137.

I Corinthians 4:1-5. In I Corinthians 3, Paul argued that, rather than being competitors, Apollos and he were, as its pastors, co-workers in the building of the Corinthian Church. He had been its founding pastor, and Apollos had built upon the foundation Paul had laid. So to compare the two and to consequently create parties around the two men, as if they were competitors, was to be totally wrong. For each of them had played the role assigned to him by Christ to build this church, and the church members themselves were beneficiaries of their respective ministries.

Now, continuing his argument from I Corinthians 3, Paul takes it a step further. “Think of us in this way,” he suggests, “as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy” (4:1-2). Paul uses two terms to refer to the respective ministries both of Apollos and of himself. In those ministries, they were both “servants of Christ” and “stewards”. A servant (slave) was someone who served at the dictates of the Master. A steward or trustee, on the other hand, was one who managed a household, whether he was a slave or free. The only means of evaluating the performance of a steward was whether he was being trustworthy of his assigned responsibility. The same could be said of a servant. But the issue Paul raises here is to whom is a steward or servant responsible? Who decides if he or she is trustworthy? This is the main emphasis of this passage.

“But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who brings to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God” (4:3-5).

“It is the Lord who judges me” (vs. 4b). The only person who can judge the performance of a steward is the head of that household. The only person who can judge the faithfulness of a slave is the slave’s owner. What other people think is of little consequence. So it is that both Paul’s and Apollos’ “head of the household” and owner of them as servants is God Himself. The members of the Corinthian Church can declare themselves followers of Apollos or Paul until they are “blue in the face”. It means nothing – nothing to God and nothing to Apollos or Paul! Both Pastors Paul and Apollos know that they have been “hired” by God to be both servant and steward, and it will be God alone who will judge their performance. And that judgment will not come until the “end of the age” when “all things now hidden in darkness will be brought to light”. It is at that final judgment of the worthiness of their respective ministries in Corinth that both Paul and Apollos “will receive commendation from God!”

With this argument, Paul should have been able to eliminate the opposition to him or to Apollos. Through this debate, Paul had demonstrated that Apollos and he did not look upon each other as competitors, but as colleagues conducting a common ministry and building up the Church in Corinth by the use of their respective gifts and responsibilities. Moreover, Paul had shown that the task of judging their respective ministries was not one given to the Church by God; rather God had reserved such judgment to God’s self, and would make judgment at the appropriate time based not upon their “success” but upon how faithfully each had been a servant and steward of the trust invested in them. These are the only grounds for thinking about a pastorate. So the job of the people is not to conspire together or to seek to divide the church into parties, but is rather

to cooperate with the work that God is doing in and through that congregation. So stop complaining and get with the program!

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