

Sermon
January 26, 2020

Covenant Presbyterian Church
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The Servant's Challenge: To Be a Light to the Nations
Isaiah 49:1-7; Acts 13:44-52

Last week we began a series of sermons on what are known as the Servant Songs in the book of Isaiah. We noted that these passages challenge us to become the servants that God has called us to be at work in the world today. Last week we heard that the Servant's role is to bring justice. Today the prophet's words challenge us to be a light to the nations.

I began to think about what it means to be a light. We live in a world that is so full of light that I am not sure we appreciate how important light is until we have a storm and the power goes out! And we don't like it very much, do we! We immediately search for candles and reach for our i-Phone flashlights or another flashlight or if we have had it happen too many times we turn on a generator because we don't like to be without light! And yet friends, there are many people who still live in darkness throughout the world.

And not just physical darkness. There are so many who are surrounded by darkness that comes from depression or addiction, illness or loneliness, fear or anxiety. Our world is full of broken people who need to see the light. This week on my Facebook page a quote was going around that I found to be profound. It is from L. R. Knost.

“Do not be dismayed by the brokenness of the world.

All things break. And all things can be mended.

Not with time, as they say, but with intention.

So go. Love intentionally, extravagantly, unconditionally.

The broken world waits in darkness for the light that is you.”

Think about that - the broken world waits in darkness for the light that is you. The world is full of

people who need someone just like you and me to bring light into their lives.

Years ago Dr. James Dobson told about a friend of his who was piloting a small single engine plane one evening just about dusk. He was headed toward a small country airport. Night fell more quickly than he anticipated, however, and by the time he reached the airport, it was impossible for him to distinguish the paved landing strip in the darkness. His little plane was not equipped with lights and no one seemed to be around the little airport to turn on any lights on the runway. He started circling the airport, uncertainly. For two hours he circled around in the darkness not knowing what to do and expecting at any moment he might run out of fuel and plunge to his death.

But someone on the ground heard the little plane circling the airport and guessed what the problem was. Immediately he jumped into his car and headed for the airport. Not knowing how to switch on any of the airport's lights, he settled for driving his car up and down the runway with his lights on high beam showing the pilot the dimensions of the runway.

Then he pulled his car off to one end of the runway with his headlights still beaming to guide the pilot to a safe landing. He became the light for the pilot.

<https://sermons.com/sermon/light-for-darkened-lives/1346970>

And friends, that is what we are challenged to be. To be the light - to be the one who provides the light for others. Think about what this person on the ground did. First, he took the time to provide some information to the pilot even though he couldn't talk to him. He used his headlights to provide the dimensions of the runway. He outlined the runway with his actions. And then he stayed there providing light until the plane landed.

Friends, for us to be the light to others our very lives need to reflect Christ's life. A little boy attended Church with his Grandfather one Sunday. Grandpa's church had beautiful stained-glass windows. Grandpa told his grandson that the windows contained pictures of Saint Matthew, Saint

Mark, Saint Luke, Saint John, Saint Paul, and whole lot of other saints.

When he got home, the boy told Mom and Dad all about it. Dad, wanting to be funny and curious about what his son had learned, asked, "What is a saint?" The boy thought for a minute and then replied, "A saint is a somebody the light shines through."

How powerful! For we are all saints - the holy, chosen ones of God. Does the light shine through our lives? Are our actions those that help others to see more clearly the path of faith? Do our actions provide what others need for a safe landing?

Friends, many in our world today have a tendency to focus on what is wrong with the world and to wish we could go back to a simpler time and place. This is nothing new. For Isaiah was speaking to the people in exile. They were longing to go home again - to return to a former life and yet what Isaiah knew was that the world they longed for did not still exist. When they returned from exile the nation they would return to was different from the nation they had left. Things had changed while they were gone. People had moved into their land and settled. They too had changed for they had lived in a foreign nation and learned some new things. No doubt some had intermarried. Life had gone on and they too had been changed. Friends, we can never go back to the way it was - we can only move into the future with a new vision.

Isaiah provides that vision in verses 1-3 of our passage and it may surprise us. For the vision is of one who was called and protected by God at the same time he was shaped in powerful ways.

Hear Isaiah's words:

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.*

The servant was chosen before his birth, equipped to be an effective instrument - a sharp sword and a polished arrow. The sharp sword was the word of God that would cut and penetrate. The polished arrow made an arrow fly straight and swiftly to its target. The images remind us that the servant had been given the skills needed - honed no doubt by being in a time and place where he had to choose intentionally to follow God in a foreign land. At the same time he had been protected by God - in the shadow of God's mighty hand and in the bowman's quiver where the polished arrow would be kept until it was needed. With these gifts the servant was sent out to be the light not just to Israel but to the nations. Hear what God said:

*"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."*

God knew that the people could do that for they had been faithful throughout the exile. God had been with them and knew that they had continued to tell the story and to work on their faith with their own people. But God had a bigger vision:

*"I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."*

God was and is not satisfied with the story only being told to one set of people. God has called us - God challenges us - just as he did to the Jews returning from exile - to be a light to the nations. To spread the gospel throughout the world.

That is what Paul came to realize after his experience with the blinding light of God on the road to Damascus. As he shared the gospel he always went first to the synagogues - to the Jews to share the good news with his own people - his tribe - those he understood. But when his words were not

received well by the Jewish faithful he moved on. For he believed Isaiah's words from God were meant for him as they are for us. He was sent to be a light to the Gentiles. A Gentile is a non-Jew. A person from another nation. The people who were not sitting in the synagogues but out in the community, in the neighborhood, down the street. And friends, the rest is history. For Paul became a light to the Gentiles and that light spread throughout the world.

God's vision has not changed. We still have a story to tell to the nations - a message of love and light. We, as the saints of the church of Jesus Christ, are challenged to get out into our neighborhoods - back among the people who have not heard the good news. We have a light that can shine into the darkness of our world. We have a story that can change lives. But it won't happen if we stay focused only on ourselves and the way we have always done things. The servant's challenge is to be a light to the nations - to all people in every land and every neighborhood.

Several centuries ago in a mountain village in Europe, a wealthy nobleman wondered what legacy he should leave to his townspeople. He made a good decision. He decided to build them a church. No one was permitted to see the plans or the inside of the church until it was finished. At its grand opening, the people gathered and marveled at the beauty of the new church. Everything had been thought of and included. It was a masterpiece.

But then someone said, "Wait a minute! Where are the lamps? It is really quite dark in here. How will the church be lighted?" The nobleman pointed to some brackets in the walls, and then he gave each family a lamp, which they were to bring with them each time they came to worship.

"Each time you are here" the nobleman said, "the place where you are seated will be lighted. Each time you are not here, that place will be dark. This is to remind you that whenever you fail to come to church, some part of God's house will be dark."

That is still true today. But God's words in Isaiah remind us that we are called to be more than

just light to fill our churches. So I would take this illustration a step further. I would challenge us to remember that unless we carry our lanterns - our lights into the world - it is not just our churches that will be dark. It is the world, our neighborhoods that will be dark.

We are called to take our light out into the world. To do what Paul and Barnabas did when they took their message - the good news of Jesus Christ - to the Gentiles. But as we carry our lanterns - our lights - into the streets there is something important to remember.

Madeline L'Engle in her book *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art* said "We do not draw people to Christ by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it. (Madeline L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art* (Macmillan, 1995), 122.)

Friends, that is our challenge - to be the light in such a way that the love of God shines through and others are drawn to a relationship with Jesus Christ. When we become the light and our light guides others to Jesus salvation will come to the ends of the earth. And that is our challenge as God's servants. To be the light so that others can see the path to salvation.