

Welcome

One of the highlights of my life was definitely the trip I took to Israel when I turned 30. I have a friend who is a Catholic priest who invited me. So of course I said yes.

I have to say that seeing the Holy Land with a priest was amazing. Because the Catholic Church runs nearly every holy site over there, from the school where they first discovered the Dead Sea Scrolls (which is where we stayed!) to the Garden of Gethsemane to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which is where Jesus was crucified, buried and resurrected.

Over and over, we'd enter a place and Thomas (my priest buddy) would walk over to the monks on shift. He'd show them his secret ID card or do the handshake or whatever he did and when they realized he was a priest, they'd wave us over to some secret, employees only entrance or give us some private tour.

I can't overemphasize that this happened again and again.

It was amazing, and really made what was already a unique experience truly once-in-a-lifetime.

And it had nothing to do with me. At all.

I was eating breakfast one morning with all the priests who worked at the school of archaeology where we stayed (again, not something that I could do if I went there tomorrow). They squinted at me and said, "What kind of Protestant are you?"

Uh... I'm a Nazarene.

None of them had heard of one of those.

We came from Methodism, I explained. Our denomination was founded about 100 years ago.

These priests, whose denomination was founded by Saint Peter as in Simon Peter as in Jesus' good buddy sort of stared at me. Finally, one of them said, "Huh."

Yeah. I was not impressive.

But that's the thing. I didn't need to be. Because I was there with Thomas. *He* was the one with all the connections, all the pull. So I just had to... go along. Enjoy the ride.

I share that story because this is incredibly similar to what we're going to see in our text today. The work of Faith is not primarily a work that rests on our shoulders. It's not about our power,

ability, fame or longevity. It has very little to do with how we're feeling or the state of our emotions.

It has everything to do with who we're following. The work of faith begins and ends with Jesus. So the question is not, "Am I doing enough at the beginning of this new year?" but rather, "Am I trusting the God who created and called me?"

Message

Today is the second Sunday of Epiphany. We just finished celebrating Jesus' arrival in the world. Epiphany is a season when we ask what it means that Jesus is for the whole world. After all, we are Jesus' church, but Jesus isn't just for us. He's for the whole world. So what's our role in Jesus' mission?

This year, our series is called Spark! We're exploring the ways Jesus ignites our calling. What does it take to be the Church Jesus calls us to be?

It might seem counterintuitive, but to answer those questions, we're going to be spending time with the prophets of the Hebrew Bible for this series. Men who lived out God's calling among God's people.

Because the God who created and cared for this special people thousands of years ago is the same God who arrived in the person of Jesus that first Christmas, and is the same God who gathered us for worship today!

Last week, we began by meeting Isaiah's Servant, who represents the ideal human, the one who perfectly embodies God's call on us. We saw how that Servant pre-figured Jesus, and how he embodies the call we have today as God's people.

Today, I want to acknowledge that this calling is terribly difficult. Living in solidarity with the poor? That feels pointless in a world that's increasingly divided between billionaire haves and the rest of us have-nots.

Calling those in power to account? In a world as politically divided as ours? Freeing the oppressed? In a country that incarcerates more of our citizens than any other country in the world?

Even if we were a big church with a ton of resources, this would feel overwhelming. But we're a small church, our member scattered all over the country. Most of us gather in small groups, pairs or even solo to join into worship.

So I get it if, when we talk about God's calling on our church, or God's calling on our lives, a lot of us want to shrink down and let those words be about somebody else. We'll just keep our heads down and let someone else handle all that calling stuff.

Today, I want to explore what we do when we feel as though we're not enough. What do God's people do when we feel too small to accomplish God's calling?

Turn with us to [Isaiah 49](#).

If you were here last week, you may remember that our text comes from what Scholars call Second Isaiah. Our book Isaiah has at least three separate collections of writings. The first comes from the original prophet, and the later two come from members of his school of prophecy (sort of like when politicians call themselves 'Lincoln Republicans' or 'Roosevelt Democrats').

Second Isaiah wrote during the years after the Exile, when God's people experienced a cultural devastation and sense of alienation. They were scattered across the nations of the world, and the idea that they could somehow matter on the world stage was frankly laughable. They were weak, small, powerless.

So, if here at the beginning of the new year, you can feel how those ancient Jewish folk felt, then you're in luck. Because Isaiah's Servant is still speaking, and they are still a picture of who God calls us to be.

Listen to me, all you in distant lands! Pay attention, you who are far away! The Lord called me before my birth; from within the womb he called me by name.

He made my words of judgment as sharp as a sword. He has hidden me in the shadow of his hand. I am like a sharp arrow in his quiver.

He said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, and you will bring me glory." -- Isaiah 49:1-3 (NLT)

The Servant opens by declaring what GOD has said is true about them. Called by God from before they were born. I love this one... and I want to come back to it at the end. For now, just stick a pin here. Don't forget this one!

Words of judgment sharper than a sword. That sounds bad to us, doesn't it? After all, aren't God's people today known far too often as judgmental? But the vision Isaiah shares here is one that looks back to God's original vision for Israel - to be a kingdom of priests. To be the example to the world of how we were created to live.

It almost goes without saying that our world isn't like that. There's more call than ever for us to speak up, to tell the world around us what God's justice looks like. Our job is to make God

famous in the world, to make sure the world knows who God is and how we were all created to live!

Wow. No wonder the Servant replies as they do, saying what we're all feeling when faced with such a daunting job description:

I replied, "But my work seems so useless! I have spent my strength for nothing and to no purpose. Yet I leave it all in the Lord's hand; I will trust God for my reward." -- Isaiah 49:4 (NLT)

My work seems so useless.

Wow. Anyone else feel that? I gotta say that I feel that way pretty often. I don't say this to ask for sympathy or fish for compliments; I just want to be honest as we explore this text. With everything we've been through as a church, I pretty often feel like a failure as a pastor. The number of people I've performed their wedding, dedicated their kids, baptized them, and they just decide one day they don't want to be a part of what God is doing here anymore - it's really painful (I know I'm not the only one).

So can you feel the sense of permission the Servant's confession grants us?

Doing God's work, remaining faithful, is often lonely work. So if we feel that way, we're not crazy or bad Christians or something. Even the Servant, God's ideal, faithful person, felt that way.

What matters is their response:

I leave it in the Lord's hands. I will trust God for my reward.

Wow... that is a faith-filled response. I'm not going to judge by what I see or feel. I'm going to trust that God is faithful. I'm going to trust God for my reward.

Song

So far, we've heard the Servant's words. How God created them and called them before birth, how God appointed them to be God's spokesperson to the world. We've heard the Servant's own dismay that that could be true given their seeming weakness and lack of impact on the world. Despite that, the Servant announces their faith in God.

Now we're going to hear from God, and God speaks directly to the Servant's own insecurities. God speaks over the Servant not words of comfort, but words of promise, of expanding the Servant's scope beyond merely God's people. Remember as we listen that the Servant isn't really a historical figure. They stand for God's people. They stand for us. Everything that's true about the Servant is true about us. Let's listen in:

And now the Lord speaks—the one who formed me in my mother’s womb to be his servant, who commissioned me to bring Israel back to him. The Lord has honored me, and my God has given me strength.

He says, “You will do more than restore the people of Israel to me. I will make you a light to the Gentiles, and you will bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”

The Lord, the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel, says to the one who is despised and rejected by the nations, to the one who is the servant of rulers: “Kings will stand at attention when you pass by. Princes will also bow low because of the Lord, the faithful one, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.” -- Isaiah 49:5–7 (NLT)

Two big promises here. First, God expands the Servant’s scope. Not only does God commission them to return God’s people to faithfulness, but to be a light to the whole world.

That’s *bigger* in scope. If we were overwhelmed by just the call to faithfulness among unfaithful people, how much more daunting is sharing God’s love with the entire world? I mean - think about the world we live in: it’s a mess!

And then God makes a promise that had to sound absolutely bonkers to the survivors of Exile: I’m going to make you the envy of the world. Kings and princes will bow before you.

Why? Not because *you* are great. But because I have chosen you.

Again, we keep coming back to this same theme: what makes us ‘successful’ isn’t numbers or measurable impact. It’s faithfulness to God’s way. More often than not, following God will mean we’re rejected. Outcast. Ignored.

That’s *always* been the case. But it doesn’t mean God has abandoned us. Quite the opposite. This is God’s mission. And God takes full responsibility to provide and care for us. So let’s keep saying Yes to God. Doing the next right thing. God has never abandoned us and God isn’t about to start now.

Communion + Examen

Back to that first bit... this isn’t about a singular person. The Servant is us, the Church. When we gather here, when we receive communion, we’re being welcomed into the whole community of the saints that stretch across the world and back through time.

The LORD called me before my birth; from within the womb he called me by name. --
Isaiah 49:1 (NLT)

God created us, and God makes this communion possible.

When in the last week have I rested in God's love for me?

What has kept me from resting in God's love more?

What in the coming week might keep me from God's love?

How can I rest in God's love in this coming week?

Assignment + Blessing