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Welcome to the 2014 Daily Bible Guide.

We're looking forward to spending the next six weeks reading and discussing the Bible with you.

The two of us recently visited the Museum of Modern Art in New York. We started at a special exhibit that both of us thought was amazing. The next several galleries were also really great. A couple of hours later, though, we were decidedly less wowed by what we were seeing. It could be that the art was genuinely less good, or that we'd simply had our fill, or that we were experiencing a sugar crash. We suspect though, that a large part of the gap in our enjoyment between the 6th floor and the 3rd floor can be explained by the fact that our phones died toward the end of the 5th floor. Through floors six and five, we were listening to an audio guide on the MOMA mobile app. Two minutes of talk that gave us some sense of where a piece fit into art history and of what inspired it went a long way toward helping us figure out what we were looking at, and hearing someone else's opinion served as a good jumping off point for us to figure out what we thought of it. Once our phones died, we were completely reliant on what our own eyes could see, and the experience fell a little flat in comparison.

We're hoping that this Daily Guide provides you with a Bible reading experience something like our 6th floor MOMA guided walkthrough. As we go along, we'll share things we've learned that give us some insight on the passage, we'll point out features that seem noteworthy to us, and we'll share our own opinions and reactions. Bible reading, like modern art, can be something of an acquired taste. We hope that whether you're brand new to the Bible, a long-time fan of it, or a long-time frenemy, this guide will give you fresh observations and viewpoints that make Isaiah 49-66 accessible, interesting, and thought-provoking.

Each day, we'll read about a page of Bible text (in the New International Version), followed by 2 sections:

- **Points of Interest**—a handful of featured comments, in which we pass along literary or historical notes and share our impressions, thoughts, questions, and reactions. These aren't meant to be exhaustive or authoritative, but simply to give you some more perspective to work with as you ponder the passage yourself.
- **Taking It Home**—every day, we'll have a suggestion of a way that we could apply the passage to our daily lives. Sometimes, it will be some sort of experiment we could try out in our everyday relationships or our approach to life. More often, it will be a topic to pray about. We'll focus our 'Taking It Home' for the day on one of a handful of subjects:
 - *For you:* How does this passage apply to you or your family?
 - *For your six:* Consider six of your favorite people, people you interact with on a regular basis, who don't seem to have much of a direct connection to God, but for whom you are very much rooting. What does this passage have to say to them, or to you about them?
 - *For our church:* How can we apply the passage corporately as a faith community?
 - *For our city:* What does the passage say about or to our entire city?

The Daily Bible Guide, while it can certainly be a standalone product, is designed to be one component of

a bigger package called The Leap of Faith, a six-week faith experiment that includes sermons, small group discussions, further prayer exercises, and more. You can learn more about the full Leap of Faith in this year's User's Manual, which is usually available nearby wherever you found this guide. By the way, the guide is available in various forms: paper, PDF, blog. PDFs are available at www.bostonvineyard.org, and the blog is at dailybibleguide.wordpress.com.

About Isaiah

Isaiah was an 8th Century BC resident of the city of Jerusalem, the capital of the small nation of Judah; Isaiah's book is the twisting, turning, surprising story of God's plans for Jerusalem. The people of Judah thought of Jerusalem as God's footstool. They knew Jerusalem was too small to contain God, but maybe it was big enough for God's feet to rest there; in other words, Jerusalem was the place where God came in contact with the world. Isaiah's story begins in much the way his Jerusalemite neighbors would expect. The 8th Century BC were tumultuous times in the ancient Near East. Several major powers—Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Persia—spent that century and the next two contending for dominance. Quite often, their path to war with one another would lead them to, through, or over Judah and its sister nation Israel. Isaiah opens his book with a prediction that Israel would get crushed between the anvil of Egypt and the hammer of Assyria, but that Judah would escape. To the people of Judah, that would be as it should be. In their sibling rivalry, Israel might have been bigger, stronger, richer, and better connected, but Judah held the trump card: Jerusalem. God would never let anything bad happen to the divine footstool, right?

To the utter shock of the Jerusalemites, the answer turns out to be, 'Yes. Yes, God would.' Judah escapes the Assyrians only to be conquered by the Babylonians. Jerusalem is captured, sacked, and has all of its most important citizens taken hostage in Babylon. A big chunk of the book of Isaiah (but not the portion that we will read) addresses this utterly earth-shattering event. How and why could such a thing happen? Is God not as strong as we thought? Does God not like us anymore? Is God not as good as we thought? Have we done something wrong? Does God want a new footstool? We pick up the story when the Jerusalemite's Babylonian captors are, in their turn, conquered by the Persians. In celebration of their victory, the Persians set the Judean captives free to return to Jerusalem. The people of Jerusalem can't believe their good luck to have survived all of this turmoil and to find themselves back in their beloved city.

At this point, in chapter 49, God says, 'Oh, did you think this was all about getting you back to Jerusalem? You're thinking way too small.' It turns out that God was never focused on Jerusalem, per se. To whatever extent Jerusalem was important, it was just as a symbol of a much bigger thing God was up to, something that would eventually fold in the whole world and everyone in it. That's the part of the story we'll be reading.

Before we get into the substance of Isaiah 49-66, it might be worth mentioning that many scholars think the book of Isaiah was actually written by two authors. Most biblical prophets spoke about events happening quite near to them in time and space. They weren't so much prognosticators about the future as they were commentators on contemporary events, injecting God's viewpoint into the conversation. Isaiah's prophecy is pretty exceptional in this regard. The story he tells encompasses the whole known

world and stretches for 200 years and more, into the far future and even to the end of the world as we know it. Many scholars can't conceive of the fact that one man could capture such a huge vision; so, they postulate that a second and maybe even a third author added to the original Isaiah's story. This isn't a topic we're all that concerned by. On the one hand, we very much leave open the possibility that God could inspire a single person with such a broad vision; on the other hand, it's still darned impressive and well worth the reading if it turns out to be a collaboration of multiple authors over time. And we've heard good scholarly arguments one way and the other. So, we withhold judgment on the authorship question. For convenience sake, though, we call the author Isaiah throughout.

And now, without further ado, we give you this year's Daily Bible Guide:

Monday, March 10th--Isaiah 49:1-6

49 Listen to me, you islands;

hear this, you distant nations:

Before I was born the LORD called me;

from my mother's womb he has spoken my name.

2 He made my mouth like a sharpened sword,

in the shadow of his hand he hid me;

he made me into a polished arrow

and concealed me in his quiver.

3 He said to me, "You are my servant,

Israel, in whom I will display my splendor."

4 But I said, "I have labored in vain;

I have spent my strength for nothing at all.

Yet what is due me is in the LORD's hand,

and my reward is with my God."

5 And now the LORD says—

he who formed me in the womb to be his servant

to bring Jacob back to him

and gather Israel to himself,

for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD

and my God has been my strength—

6 he says:

"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant

to restore the tribes of Jacob

and bring back those of Israel I have kept.

I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,

that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

Points of Interest:**The Literary Note of the Day--*On Hebrew poetry***

Over the course of our reading, you might get the impression that Isaiah is repeating himself. And he is. Whereas in English we tend to use rhyme and meter in our poetry, the ancient Hebrews used repetition and parallelism. These repeated parallels artfully reinforce the poet's message, and subtly add depth to the picture they're painting. So, we'll frequently run across two synonymous or near-synonymous verses paired in a couplet. Our passage starts out with two such couplets; *Islands* and *distant nations* in the first two lines are, for example, two ways of saying, 'faraway places.' So, our passage starts with a repeated call from Isaiah: 'Hey, everyone. Yes, even you way over there. Listen up. I have something you'll want to hear.'

The Theological Term of the Day--*Israel*

Israel (also known as Jacob) was the founding father of Isaiah's home nation of Judah and its sister nation, Israel. Jacob was the grandson and heir of Abraham, to whom God promised: 'I will be your God. I will make you a great nation, and through you all the nations of the world will be blessed.' Israel had twelve sons, each of whom became the leader of a tribe. Together the twelve tribes formed the original nation Israel. Later on, the twelve tribes split up in a civil war, with two of the tribes forming the nation of Judah and the other ten forming the nation of Israel. Isaiah uses *Israel* in several different ways, sometimes referring to the man, sometimes to the ten-tribe political entity, sometimes to all twelve tribes, and sometimes to whomever from the twelve tribes remained faithful to their relationship with God. Often, you can tell which one Isaiah means from context. Today's passage may not entirely be one of those times. My best guess is that in verse 3 ('You are my servant, Israel') he's referring to the person; God is telling the narrator, 'You remind me of my old friend, your great-granddaddy, Israel.' I think in the other times where 'Jacob' or 'Israel' appear in this passage, it's in the faithful remnant capacity. Isaiah, as a Judean, has something of a tendency to highly identify the nation of Judah with that faithful remnant.

The Image of the Day--*The unshot arrow*

This passage describes a beautiful weapon, an arrow that's been honed and polished to perfect sharpness. Then, instead of being fired, the arrow is put away in the quiver. And it sits there, and sits there, and sits there. When will it be fired? The arrow says to God, 'Put me in the game, coach. I know I can do it,' but God keeps it on the bench. It feels like a waste. Not so, God says. It's such a good arrow that God doesn't want to spend it on any ordinary target. God is saving it for a very special occasion, an occasion where only this particular arrow will do.

The Question of the Day--*Who is the narrator?*

Who is this person who is compared to Israel, and to being a particularly fine weapon? My pet theory is that it's Isaiah. We may have just started reading, but Isaiah has been writing for forty-eight chapters already; and he feels like all of that work has gone to nothing. Nobody is listening, and nothing has changed even though he's been talking until he's blue in the face. When will his words finally strike home?

My pet theory is probably wrong. Most commentators think that the narrator here is someone

they call the Servant, a mysterious supernatural figure God calls upon to fulfill God's biggest purposes. Isaiah has a series of Servant Songs that talk about the work of this supernatural deputy. We'll read a couple of them. This is probably one of them.

The Big Idea of the Day--*Think bigger*

All of Isaiah's attention is on what will happen to 'the tribes of Jacob,' his own people. He sees the trouble they are in, and wonders why they aren't being rescued. That's why he feels like he (or, more likely, the supernatural Servant) is a wasted arrow. The arrow could be fired to save Israel, but there it is in the quiver. God replies that simply rescuing Israel is small potatoes. In Isaiah's parlance, *gentiles* means, 'the nations,' in comparison to 'the Nation,' meaning Judah or Israel; in other words, *gentiles* means, 'the others.' When Isaiah asks, 'What about Israel?' God responds, 'What about everyone else?' Israel may have their problems, but God sees an even bigger problem, one that affects the whole world. That's the problem God wants to solve, with the help of Isaiah and this Servant. God has something broader and deeper in mind than Isaiah can even imagine.

Taking It Home:

For you--It seems like we're not that great at getting our hopes and expectations right. We either think too small, or are too eager for action. How are you feeling about your life right now? When you think about your day, the next 6-weeks of this faith experiment, or the next year trajectory of your life, what comes to mind? Are you filled with hope? With dread? Impatient for everything to just start working? Ask God to give you God's hope for your life. Ask God for God's perspective on any areas of your life that feel a little grim. Ask God for patience for the areas of your life in which you are anxious for immediate change, and ask for a bigger picture in places where you might be dreaming too small.

Tuesday, March 11th--Isaiah 49:7-13

7 This is what the LORD says—

the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel—

to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation,

to the servant of rulers:

"Kings will see you and stand up,

princes will see and bow down,

because of the LORD, who is faithful,

the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

8 This is what the LORD says:

"In the time of my favor I will answer you,

and in the day of salvation I will help you;
I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people,
to restore the land
and to reassign its desolate inheritances,
9 to say to the captives, 'Come out,'
and to those in darkness, 'Be free!'
"They will feed beside the roads
and find pasture on every barren hill.
10 They will neither hunger nor thirst,
nor will the desert heat or the sun beat down on them.
He who has compassion on them will guide them
and lead them beside springs of water.
11 I will turn all my mountains into roads,
and my highways will be raised up.
12 See, they will come from afar—
some from the north, some from the west,
some from the region of Aswan."
13 Shout for joy, you heavens;
rejoice, you earth;
burst into song, you mountains!
For the LORD comforts his people
and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.

Points of Interest:

God's Name of the Day--Redeemer

In the ancient Near East, people could be sold into slavery to pay their debts or could be captured in war. It was the responsibility of their next of kin to try to buy them back, known as redeeming them. God is that next of kin for Israel, and--I think--more than Israel. Seeing as God just finished saying that rescuing Israel was 'too small a thing,' it's a little surprising that at the beginning of this passage God is known specifically as Israel's Redeemer. Perhaps God is using his previous redemption of Israel as a calling card: having been exclusively Israel's redeemer in the past, he's

now expanding his services to others who need to be bought back.

The Image of the Day--*Suddenly famous*

A nobody, someone completely beneath notice, even someone previously despised, suddenly becomes so famous that the rich and powerful are lining up for autographs. Even at the palace, all conversations stop and all eyes turn the direction of this recently overlooked one when they walk into the room. I think this unexpected superstar is the unshot arrow from yesterday, God's mystery Servant. From being hidden away in the quiver, all of a sudden they become the center of the world's attention.

The Theological Term of the Day--*Covenant*

A covenant is a sort of an alliance or agreement, but with deeply personally bonds. I think of it like swearing to be blood brothers: 'From now on, no matter what happens, we're on one another's side.' God likes entering into these blood brother relationships with people. God makes covenants with Noah, with Abraham, with Moses, with the entire people of Israel, with David. Covenants are all over the place in the Bible, but the covenant we see in this passage is a very peculiar one. Somehow, this covenant is a person, namely the Servant.

Throughout this passage, Isaiah seems to be grasping at words to describe what's going on. It's so new and different that the old terms just don't seem to capture it. In some way, the Servant is the essence of God's blood brother relationship with people.

The Big Idea of the Day--*The prisoners are set free*

There's a massive prison break. Dungeon doors are swung open, and these captives are free to go. And they're not miserable fugitives either. They have nothing to fear. Instead of scurrying from hiding place to hiding place, still dragging their chains behind them and wearing their prison clothes, they take the open highway and travel in luxury. The Servant takes care of their every travel need: rest, shade, food, drink, refreshment, travel advice. Even more, God directly gets into the game, smoothing out the road for easier and more comfortable travel: 'Just let me get that mountain out of the way for you.'

Much of the language used evokes the idea of the Judean captives returning from Babylon to Jerusalem, but that can't be what God truly has in mind here. Babylon is to the east of Jerusalem, but these prisoners come from every direction but east (Aswan is to the south). Prisons all over the place are being emptied. If you're being held captive, be on the lookout. Today might be your lucky day.

The Bonus Image of the Day--*Singing mountains*

I know we already had an image of the day, but this is such a fun one I couldn't resist adding it. What God and God's Servant are doing here is so exciting that even the earth, the sky, and the mountains are impressed. They're normally pretty reserved, but they can't help themselves; they break out in applause, and even do a little hooting and hollering when they see what God has just done.

Taking It Home:

*For your six--*What's happening in life right now for your six? Is there some type of breakthrough they've been looking for in their life? Ask God to turn around any situation that might not be going so well. Ask God to give your six the same jubilant freedom that the freed captives had when they discovered that God had unlocked their prison doors for them.

Wednesday, March 12th--Isaiah 49:14-21

14 But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me,
the Lord has forgotten me."

15 "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast
and have no compassion on the child she has borne?

Though she may forget,

I will not forget you!

16 See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;
your walls are ever before me.

17 Your children hasten back,
and those who laid you waste depart from you.

18 Lift up your eyes and look around;
all your children gather and come to you.

As surely as I live," declares the LORD,
"you will wear them all as ornaments;
you will put them on, like a bride.

19 "Though you were ruined and made desolate
and your land laid waste,
now you will be too small for your people,
and those who devoured you will be far away.

20 The children born during your bereavement
will yet say in your hearing,

'This place is too small for us;
give us more space to live in.'

21 Then you will say in your heart,

‘Who bore me these?
I was bereaved and barren;
I was exiled and rejected.
Who brought these up?
I was left all alone,
but these—where have they come from?’”

Points of Interest:

The Bible Word of the Day--*Zion*

‘Zion’ is a poetic nickname for Jerusalem. It’s the name of the hill on which Jerusalem is situated.

The Image of the Day--*A tattooed hand*

God is like a teenager writing her crush’s name on her hand in class, or like a reckless young lover getting a tattoo of his sweetheart’s likeness on his forearm. With all of these new friends God is making, Zion is feeling a little jealous. ‘Have you forgotten all about me?’ Zion asks. God’s answers, ‘No way. How could I? Whenever I look at my hand, I see you.’

The Big Idea of the Day--*With God, it’s not a zero-sum game.*

It’s perhaps understandable that Zion would be feeling a little rejected here. God used to call himself, ‘Israel’s Redeemer.’ Now, God is off in every direction, redeeming people north, south, and west, and saving strangers at the ends of the earth. What is Zion, yesterday’s news?

Zion sees it as a clear, binary choice: either you save me, or them. Maybe God sees it as a binary choice too, but a different one: either God is a rescuer, or not. If God is a rescuer, God rescues everyone. The very same impulse that makes God Israel’s redeemer sends God to the help of other nations as well.

Zion assumes a limited capacity that simply isn’t the case with God. God doesn’t have to choose carefully how to spend a fixed amount of love, attention, and energy. God has more than enough of all of them to go around. Saving other people doesn’t make God any less willing or able to continue to save Zion as well. Going back to the image of the tattooed hand, God uniquely (definitely don’t take this as a model for your own love life or tattoo choices) has a hand that can fit everyone’s name. Zion’s name is there. So is Aswan’s. And it’s not that they have to split God’s attention between them; each of them gets the full dose of God’s saving compassion.

The Big Question of the Day--*Where did all of this goodness come from?*

Zion’s complaints aren’t only the product of misplaced jealousy. Zion has a very concrete problem, and it’s wondering when God will help solve it. Zion is a city, but empty; and an empty city is no city at all. The very essence of a city is being full of people, people living, and working, and talking, and commuting, and doing business. Zion isn’t full of people, but of ‘Vacancy’ signs. It’s not a city; it’s a ghost town. It’s like a restaurant that is strangely and suspiciously empty at the height of the dinner

hour. God promises this situation won't last. Soon, it'll find itself the hot reservation. Before Zion knows it, it'll go from asking, 'Where did everyone go?' to, 'Where are we going to put everyone?'

If I were Zion--which I guess I am; my name too is written on God's hand--I'd find this promise both immensely encouraging and fairly disorienting. It's good news that things aren't always going to be how they are right now, but it's difficult to prepare emotionally for the kind of turnaround God is describing. Prepare to be full where you are currently empty. Prepare to rave about the things you are currently complaining about. Prepare to celebrate the parts of your life you currently grieve. God has taken on the job of getting us out of trouble. Our job is to get ready to welcome the much better life to which God leads us.

Taking it home:

*For our city--*More often than I like to admit, I wrongly assume that because I'm part of a church I must have a special corner on God. Don't get me wrong: I really love our church, and think God does too. That said, I get the impression that God doesn't like to be bound, whether it be to a Middle Eastern mountain or a really pretty brick church building. Instead God thinks of himself as the God of everyone, who is working for all people all the time. Spend some time today celebrating God's good will toward our entire city. Thank God for all the good things in our city. Ask God for even more good for our city. Tell God that we'd like to be a part of all the ways God is working in our city.

Thursday, March 13th--Isaiah 49:22-50:3

22 This is what the Sovereign LORD says:

"See, I will beckon to the nations,
I will lift up my banner to the peoples;
they will bring your sons in their arms
and carry your daughters on their hips.

23 Kings will be your foster fathers,
and their queens your nursing mothers.

They will bow down before you with their faces to the ground;
they will lick the dust at your feet.

Then you will know that I am the LORD;
those who hope in me will not be disappointed."

24 Can plunder be taken from warriors,
or captives be rescued from the fierce?

25 But this is what the LORD says:

“Yes, captives will be taken from warriors,
and plunder retrieved from the fierce;

I will contend with those who contend with you,
and your children I will save.

26 I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh;
they will be drunk on their own blood, as with wine.

Then all mankind will know
that I, the LORD, am your Savior,
your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.”

50 This is what the LORD says:

“Where is your mother’s certificate of divorce
with which I sent her away?

Or to which of my creditors
did I sell you?

Because of your sins you were sold;
because of your transgressions your mother was sent away.

2 When I came, why was there no one?
When I called, why was there no one to answer?

Was my arm too short to deliver you?
Do I lack the strength to rescue you?

By a mere rebuke I dry up the sea,
I turn rivers into a desert;

their fish rot for lack of water
and die of thirst.

3 I clothe the heavens with darkness
and make sackcloth its covering.”

Points of Interest

The Image of the Day--*A blended family*

Yesterday’s passage actually weaves together two different images: an empty city (which we

focused on) and the equally sad, tragic, and paradoxical picture of a childless mother. In today's passage, God continues with the childless mother metaphor. Or, rather, God answers the childless mother who finds herself surrounded by children and asks in surprise and delight, 'Where did all of these children come from?' It turns out they're adopted. These new children of hers are the released captives from every direction from 49: 12, whom God has brought to her doorstep. And it's not just kids being added to the family. One of the kings from 49:7 does some adopting himself, making the childless mother his own adopted heir. There's a queen in the house now too; she seems to be a nanny, or maybe a sister-in-law with a new baby herself, or something. I think Isaiah wants us to let our imagination run wild as to the new family being gathered here: new step siblings and in-laws, long-lost uncles, cousins she's never met, and so on and so on. This woman who was so recently rattling around a big, empty house now finds herself the center of a big, crazy, blended family.

I think God is forming a new Zion. It's made up of pieces from all over the place: the Babylonian captives returning to Jerusalem, the redeemed slaves from the north, the freed captives from the west, a few curious royals from who knows where. Everyone God finds, wherever God finds them, is adopted into this new family. It's a little weird, and very unexpected, and takes some getting used to as virtual strangers share a home and a life. But God thinks it's a great way to live.

The Bible Reference of the Day--*The crossing of the Red Sea*

Upon further review, the slaves and prisoners are not yet 100% free. Some of their captors are having a hard time letting go. It might take some effort to set them free and get them to their new home. It's okay, though. God is an old pro at operations like this.

God reminds us of the time God rescued all of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. They had an Egyptian army in hot pursuit behind them, and a sea blocking the way in front of them. So, God simply dried up the sea. Turning major natural barriers into perfectly passable roads is something of a specialty with God. It happened again when the Israelites completed their desert wandering and entered the Promised Land; God held back the Jordan River so that they could cross without getting wet.

The Grisly Moment of the Day--*Oppressors eating their own flesh*

Freeing slaves and prisoners is not a bloodless action. I have to say, though, that it seems to me that, beyond simply acknowledging the unfortunate necessity of violence, God in Isaiah kind of revels in it. There's more than a little Samuel L. Jackson from *Pulp Fiction* in God's words here: 'And you will know my name is the LORD when I lay my vengeance upon thee.'

We'll have the chance to talk more about the blood-spurting tendencies of Isaiah in later chapters. For now, I'll just say that there's a certain rough fairness to what God is saying: 'If you like the taste of human flesh so much, take a bite out of your own arm, and leave other people alone.' Ok, maybe there's just a touch of intimidation to go with the rough fairness: 'No, seriously. Bite yourself, or I'll do it for you.'

The Plot Twist of the Day--*God's been there the whole time*

Throughout these passages, there's been this feeling that God has been too slow to act. Zion

wonders if she's been forgotten or abandoned by God. Isaiah can't understand why the arrow is still in the quiver. When will God stop dilly-dallying and do something? It turns out God has been there trying to help the whole time, but they've been ignoring God. God's been calling, and calling, and calling, and no one answers. God is there, ready to save. It's just a question of whether or not anyone is paying attention.

Taking it home:

For your six: Ask God to show your six ways that God has in fact been present throughout their life. Consider asking your six if there have been times when they have noticed God. Either way, ask God to give your six the ability to pay attention to the ways that God is calling out uniquely for each of them.

Friday, March 14th--Isaiah 50:4-11

4 The Sovereign LORD has given me a well-instructed tongue,
to know the word that sustains the weary.

He wakens me morning by morning,
wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed.

5 The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears;
I have not been rebellious,
I have not turned away.

6 I offered my back to those who beat me,
my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;
I did not hide my face
from mocking and spitting.

7 Because the Sovereign LORD helps me,
I will not be disgraced.

Therefore have I set my face like flint,
and I know I will not be put to shame.

8 He who vindicates me is near.
Who then will bring charges against me?
Let us face each other!

Who is my accuser?
Let him confront me!

9 It is the Sovereign LORD who helps me.

Who will condemn me?

They will all wear out like a garment;

the moths will eat them up.

10 Who among you fears the LORD

and obeys the word of his servant?

Let the one who walks in the dark,

who has no light,

trust in the name of the LORD

and rely on their God.

11 But now, all you who light fires

and provide yourselves with flaming torches,

go, walk in the light of your fires

and of the torches you have set ablaze.

This is what you shall receive from my hand:

You will lie down in torment.

Points of Interest:

Today's Nice Turn of a Phrase--*The word that sustains the weary*

We've talked a lot about the metaphor of the Servant (probably) as a finely honed arrow. Actually, the polished arrow is only one of two weapon images for the Servant in our first passage. It also says that the Servant's mouth, specifically, is like a sharp sword. In today's passage we come back to the subject of the Servant (probably)'s mouth. This time, we get a metaphor of an athlete in training. God is the coach, and the Servant's tongue is the athlete. Starting at the crack of dawn every day, under the coach's careful supervision, the Servant's tongue practices knowing exactly what to say.

Given the aggressive imagery--their mouth is a sword, it's a boxer--I would expect the Servant's words to be incisive, offensive, cutting. Far from it. This word the Servant practices at all day, every day is the right word to encourage someone who is about to give up, to help them keep going. The Servant has trained hard to be the world's best at saying what makes a person feel better and stronger when they most need it.

The Mystery of the Day--*Why do people keep abusing the Servant?*

No, really. Why? As far as we can see, the Servant is quietly going about the business of become an expert at saying the right thing. Somehow, this provokes quite a torrent of abuse: mocking,

spitting, hair-pulling, beating. Something's not quite right here. The Servant seems like the kind of person you'd really want to have around. So, why do people respond to them like the Servant is a Nazi collaborator or something?

Counter-intuitive Advice of the Day--*Whatever you do, don't turn the lights on*

As we all know, the dark is scary. And even people who aren't scared of the dark don't particularly like stumbling around in it. When we walk across a strange room--or even a familiar one--if at all possible, we switch the light on first. It's hard to think of a stronger urge than the one to flip the light switch on.

And yet, in this passage, God says that's the very thing we must, at all costs, resist.

We're walking down a treacherous, unfamiliar path in the middle of a pitch-black night. We have flashlights. And in no uncertain terms God says, 'Whatever you do, do not turn that it on.' If we do, we're on our own, God will have nothing more to do with us, and things will go very badly.

I'm not quite sure why the flashlight is such a bad idea. Maybe it draws unwelcome attention (for some reason, I'm imagining werewolves), or makes us too easily seen by an enemy. Are we trying to sneak past some sort of danger? It's not explained. What is clear is that the flashlight is unnecessary. God is an excellent guide, and knows the path well. If we take God's hand and let God lead us, God is utterly trustworthy to get us safely to our destination. All we have to do is rely on God, and resist the temptation (for some reason) to turn the lamp on.

Taking it Home:

*For you--*What's been your experience of trusting God? Does the concept seem foreign? foolish? risky but worth it? second nature? Have there been ways you've tried trusting God and felt let down? Take some time to think about to whom or what you turn to when things are hard. What are things or people you look to in order to feel secure? What are reasons you resist trusting God? Talk to God about whom you trust. Tell God that you do --or want to--trust God instead of _____.

Saturday, March 15th--Isaiah 51: 1-8

51 "Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness
and who seek the LORD:

Look to the rock from which you were cut
and to the quarry from which you were hewn;

2 look to Abraham, your father,
and to Sarah, who gave you birth.

When I called him he was only one man,
and I blessed him and made him many.

3 The LORD will surely comfort Zion
and will look with compassion on all her ruins;
he will make her deserts like Eden,
her wastelands like the garden of the LORD.
Joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the sound of singing.

4 “Listen to me, my people;
hear me, my nation:
Instruction will go out from me;
my justice will become a light to the nations.

5 My righteousness draws near speedily,
my salvation is on the way,
and my arm will bring justice to the nations.

The islands will look to me
and wait in hope for my arm.

6 Lift up your eyes to the heavens,
look at the earth beneath;
the heavens will vanish like smoke,
the earth will wear out like a garment
and its inhabitants die like flies.

But my salvation will last forever,
my righteousness will never fail.

7 “Hear me, you who know what is right,
you people who have taken my instruction to heart:
Do not fear the reproach of mere mortals
or be terrified by their insults.

8 For the moth will eat them up like a garment;
the worm will devour them like wool.
But my righteousness will last forever,
my salvation through all generations.”

Points of Interest:**The Famous Bible Figures of the Day--*Abraham and Sarah***

As I mentioned in the 'Israel' section on the first day, Abraham and Sarah are Israel's grandparents. It's God's covenant with Abraham that leads to the special relationship God has with the twelve tribes of Israel. Isaiah brings them up here as an example of walking in the dark.

When God first meets Abraham and Sarah, they're an older couple without any kids. Even nowadays, most couples end up wanting children, and it's a defining moment of their lives if they're unable to. In Abraham and Sarah's time, it was an exponentially bigger deal; you basically weren't a complete couple if you didn't have a son to inherit your legacy. And Abraham and Sarah don't have a son, and they're past childbearing years. They've had a moderate amount of success in life, but nothing flashy. They have a comfortable house, but not really a home. And, above all, no child to validate their marriage or to pass anything on to.

God meets them, and says, 'Come with me.'

Abraham says, 'Where are we going?'

God responds, 'Just come with me. Leave everything you have, take up stakes, and follow me. I promise you that you'll have a son, and a place to call home. And you'll be the father of a nation--make that many nations. And all the rest of the world will be blessed through you.'

So, Abraham and Sarah start moving. And after a very long time of walking in the dark, as it were, with many twists and turns, and a few moments where one or the other of them briefly succumbs to the temptation to turn on their flashlight, but mostly with them holding God's hand and trusting God's guidance, things turn out just as God promised.

If we follow in Abraham and Sarah's footsteps, everything will turn out okay.

The Word of the Day--*Righteousness*

Up until now, Isaiah has been talking about God bringing salvation; God has primarily taken the role of a rescuer. Today, righteousness and justice are added to the mix. It's like the three things come as a matched set. In a series of parallel verses, God says,

- I'm sending my righteousness, rush delivery;
- I'm on the way, and I'm bringing salvation with me;
- I'm bringing enough justice for everyone.

I say three things, but it's more like two. In modern English-speaking society, we use *justice* to refer to matters of the law, fairness, and ethics, and we use *righteousness* in matters of morality and religion. In the Bible, the two words are essentially synonyms, used interchangeably (some commentators say that they're the same word, just translated differently in English; others say that they're similar words with even more similar meanings. Not knowing Hebrew, I have no way to parse that out, but practically speaking it's a slight difference anyway). Both of them mean, 'to straighten.'

At least in this passage--and more often than we might expect in the Bible as a whole--the concern isn't with people's righteousness, but with God's. In other words, it's not about whether people are doing the right thing or not (though we will get to that in some later chapters), it's about whether God can straighten things out or not. When verse 1 mentions 'you who pursue righteousness,' I don't think it means, 'you who are trying to do the right thing'; I think it means, 'you who are looking for God to make things right.' The people being addressed in this passage are as lacking in justice towards them as Abraham and Sarah were lacking in children. If they're trusting and patient, like Abraham and Sarah (mostly) were, God is on the way with plenty of justice for everyone.

Up until now in our study of Isaiah, God has mostly taken on the role of a firefighter, rescuing people from burning buildings. In this passage, God becomes a police officer as well, making sure the arsonist doesn't set fire to any more buildings.

The Image of the Day--Worn-out clothes

The wearing out of a piece of clothing happens gradually, mostly unnoticed. Then, one day, it suddenly tips from being invisible to being impossible to ignore. As you take your sweater out of the drawer, you really look at it for the first time in a long time and think, 'I don't remember this being quite so see-through before.' Or you try to put it on, and it's so threadbare it simply rips. Apparently that's how God suddenly feels about the world. It's time for a new one.

Taking it home:

*For our church--*Pray that our church would be a place that knows and experiences this salvation that lasts forever. I often find getting attached to a certain program, class, Sunday experience, or way of doing things, but Isaiah tells us that those things have a way of wearing out. It seems like God's latching on to this everlasting saving love and freedom might be a better goal. Agree? Ask God to help our church keep our focus and attention on what matters the most.

Sunday, March 16th--Isaiah 51:9-16

9 Awake, awake, arm of the LORD,
clothe yourself with strength!

Awake, as in days gone by,
as in generations of old.

Was it not you who cut Rahab to pieces,
who pierced that monster through?

10 Was it not you who dried up the sea,
the waters of the great deep,
who made a road in the depths of the sea

so that the redeemed might cross over?

11 Those the LORD has rescued will return.

They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.

Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

12 “I, even I, am he who comforts you.

Who are you that you fear mere mortals,
human beings who are but grass,

13 that you forget the LORD your Maker,
who stretches out the heavens
and who lays the foundations of the earth,
that you live in constant terror every day
because of the wrath of the oppressor,
who is bent on destruction?

For where is the wrath of the oppressor?

14 The cowering prisoners will soon be set free;
they will not die in their dungeon,
nor will they lack bread.

15 For I am the LORD your God,
who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar—
the LORD Almighty is his name.

16 I have put my words in your mouth
and covered you with the shadow of my hand—
I who set the heavens in place,
who laid the foundations of the earth,
and who say to Zion, ‘You are my people.’”

Points of Interest:**God's Name of the Day--*Arm of the Lord***

In the Bible's Old Testament, the arm is the body part most associated with strength. For example, a very typical way of referring to God's rescue of the Israelites from Egypt is, 'God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm' (Deuteronomy 5:15).

Here and throughout the stretch of Isaiah we'll be reading, Isaiah takes it to a whole new level, making 'Arm of the Lord' into a name or a title. It could be that Isaiah is referring to some lieutenant of God, perhaps the Servant, who especially represents God's strength. I tend to think, though, that Isaiah is using it to refer to God directly: 'Come on, God. When are we going to see that Arm-y version of you again?' It reminds me of Popeye the Sailor. Isaiah is asking God to down the can of spinach, and jump into the fight with biceps bulging.

[**Word Nerd Moment of the Day** (for those of you who enjoy such things)--I was wondering if our English word *army* derives from a similar association of the arm and strength. The Arm of a king, for instance, would be his army. It turns out that it's just a coincidence. The word *arm* has Germanic roots, and the word *army* comes from Latin.]

The Mythical Monster of the Day--*Rahab*

Rahab is a mythical sea monster, or even more a primeval sea god. In ancient Near Eastern creation stories, the world was formed out of a sea of chaos, and that chaotic sea still threatens to break in and overwhelm the world at any time; there are echoes of this cosmology in the Bible's creation story. Rahab is an agent of, or maybe the ruler of, the chaos sea. God has completely tamed her, just like one does a wild horse, and can make the sea do whatever God wants, whether that be to dry up or to storm. And if God can do that, whatever merely human tyrants we face are no problem at all.

'Rahab' is probably doing double-duty here, because it was also a poetic name for Egypt. So, Isaiah is simultaneously referring to creation and to the crossing of the Red Sea. God has shown the raging seas, the Red Sea, and the Egyptians that God is boss. With that sort of record, who exactly should God be afraid of?

The Image of the Day--*Chased down by joy*

Isaiah subtly hints again that it may not so much be the case that God is unwilling or unable to rescue us as that we are less interested in being rescued than we think. It doesn't matter. God's two trusty hounds Gladness and Joy are excellent trackers, and they're faster than us. They will sniff us out, hunt us down, and smother us with their sloppy affection.

Taking it home:

For our city--I love the idea of joy and gladness overtaking people. Ask God to overtake our city with joy and gladness. Ask that people would easily find themselves with a spring in their step and glad to live in this city--even in the eternal-brown-gray of March.