

**Meadowbrook Congregational Church**

**“To Light a Thing”**

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***Isaiah 49:1-7***

*Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! 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. And he said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.” But I said, “I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward with my God.” And now the LORD says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and my God has become my strength— he says, “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; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”*

*Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, “Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”*

When you are a minister, sometimes you cringe when upon meeting a person for the first time. People who want to start a conversation tend to ask you about your work. That is why I usually keep very quiet on airplanes. I don’t want to get into a conversation that might make me uncomfortable. I have learned that it is a dangerous thing to tell someone that you are a minister. Certainly, some people will offer some kind words of admiration. But others will sense the opportunity for a spirited theological debate, a debate that I am not interested in nor one I can win. And still others don’t have a lot of respect for the clergy. I’ve heard it a million times before- I only work one hour a week, let the church take care of me, and talk all I want while people are forced to sit and listen.

I had a house painter tell me that one time. I usually bite my tongue but that time I foolishly didn’t. I told him that I wanted to be a house painter. Then I could pack up my stuff at the end of the day and be done with work. If I were a house painter I could step back every so often and reflect upon my work and actually see that I had accomplished something. And when I finished painting a house, I knew the task was completed. Of course I really never wanted to be a house painter. I can’t stand to paint!

I have shared with you before the story of one of my clergy colleagues here in Michigan. He spends his day off doing small engine repair. He fixes lawn mowers, snow blowers, and chain saws. He doesn’t do it for the money. I know that he doesn’t have a lot of free time on his hands. But he does it as a rewarding hobby. He says, “It is good to see something work right. Even if I can’t fix anything or anyone at the church, I can at least be satisfied by fixing a lawn mower.”

We have entered the season of Epiphany, a time to consider how God is revealed to each of us in the journey of our life. It is a time to recall the promise of our baptisms and to

reflect upon who God created us to be. It is a time to seriously contemplate our call as followers of Christ, and how we are using that which God has provided us in time and talent and opportunity to do the work of God in our world.

In the Scripture lesson this morning, the prophet Isaiah speaks about the serious and awesome nature of responding to God's call. This is the Second Servant Song of Isaiah. While early Hebrew belief established a view that God would raise up powerful warrior kings so that Israel would be exalted among the nations, Isaiah personifies a servant who serves even though wounded and flawed. As the servant reviews his call he writes, "Before I was born the Lord chose me and appointed me to be his servant...He said to me, you are my servant. Because of you, people will praise me." So far this sounds awfully nice and easy. And it theory it is. God has chosen us to serve and through our service people should come to know and praise God.

But the servant's words don't end there. Things get a bit more complicated. "I have labored in vain. I have spent my strength for nothing." Clearly, even while understanding his call and responsibility, he is frustrated by it. How can one serve the greatness of God if such service is unproductive?

I wonder if this part of the servant's experience is closer to our own experience of service? Have you ever had to recruit Sunday School teachers? Have you served on a board or committee, left home on a cold snowy night, only to find that not enough people showed up for a quorum? Have you ever introduced a new idea for ministry, only to have it quickly dismissed with another's negative reaction? Have you challenged people to change when they are quite comfortable with the way things are? Have you offered heartfelt assistance to a person only to find that your charity changed nothing in the person's status or behavior? Is the work of God as rewarding or as satisfying as we wish it would be? Do things ever really get totally finished or accomplished? Can God really work through me and through my service within the church?

Failure seems to be a common experience in the work of the Lord. With God's call comes the frustration of wondering whether or not your efforts are accomplishing anything. With the work of God comes the sense of incompleteness. While we yearn for measureable results in our earthly labors, while we seek visible and irrefutable evidence of our success in life, we seldom get a final score or grade when it comes to serving God.

God answered the servant, probably not in the way the he expected. God admitted that the people of Israel hadn't responded to the servant's cry for change. Like most proud and busy people, they did not understand how they had sinned nor were they receptive to any words of judgment. The servant who saw his mission as changing this behavior had apparently failed. But God did not quit. God gave the servant even more to do. "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; now I will give you as a light to the nations." Listen to that again! Your first task, at which you failed, was far too easy. You need to think bigger! God did not seem to care about the specific task failures. God had a plan in mind a bigger picture that would bring light to all humankind.

It seems that sometimes in our lack of satisfaction with church activity, church government, and specific ministries we lose track of the larger work to which God calls us. Yet God reminds us that it is too light for us to be held back by the irritations of detail and disappointment. It is too light a thing for us to equate the success of our journey of faith with our own personal success or with our satisfaction over the activities of the local church. God's plan looks beyond what is seen and behind what may seem all too futile, to something unseen and unexpected. There is something greater yet to come.

Tomorrow is the day in which we remember and reflect upon the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. It seems rather fitting that our Scripture lesson deals with the frustration of the servant of God to accomplish anything. Certainly Dr. King must have been frustrated many times in his struggle for racial justice. I know that Martin Luther King Jr. was a pastor of a church in

Birmingham, Alabama. There had to have been many issues and tasks within the ministry of that specific church to keep him busy, and probably enough failure within his ministry there to discourage him and to cause him to set his expectations low. But it was too light a thing for Dr. King to simply minister to the issues of one community of faith. He understood that there was a greater vision of God beyond budgets and meetings and committees. He encouraged all of us to understand that there is a whole world out there where we can be shining. He understood that our success as followers of God will not be measured by our accomplishments or any immediate visible results. The work of God is a seed planted in hope, in the knowledge that the harvest may not occur until years after the planting. We may not see ourselves making a difference but God believes in us and expects us to act in the hope that we will make a difference.

Like the servant of Isaiah, we are called. We have a task to do in the work of God. Like the servant, we may feel inadequate about our ability. We might believe that we are not the ones for the call. We might be of the opinion that someone else has more gifts, more talent, or more knowledge. We might think that our energies are spent and our frustrations are proof of our failures.

David Prior tells the story of a man who was so discouraged by his health concerns that he wanted to die. He developed a plan to kill himself by running until collapsed. One day he began to run and he went a great distance. He grew very tired but he did not drop. He decided to stop for that day and try again the next. The next day he ran and ran until he reached the point of exhaustion. Again he did not drop. The man kept doing the same thing day after day, hoping that one day his body would fail and he would end it all. But a funny thing happened. In his failure he got stronger. In his exercise he found a larger mission. He developed a better and healthier body. He found a new life and purpose.

The servant's words end not with resignation but with hope and affirmation. "Surely my cause is with the Lord and my reward is with God." So it is for us. God calls us to this place. It is God who has given us tasks of ministry here. Yet we are not to define our ministry simply by what we do here. We are not to focus on our own personal goals. We are not to measure our efforts according to our comfort and our desired results. We are not to see our work and service only in our own terms. From that perspective we will see only failure. We will block God's spirit and power. It is too light a thing. God has more in mind.