

“Light to the Nations”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
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Isaiah 49: 1-7

I think one of the most vexing conundrums we can face is discerning our vocation. One definition of “vocation” says, “a strong desire to spend your life doing a certain kind of work” (www.merriam-webster.com). Interestingly, most of the time, we associate vocation with religious work, and indeed other definitions of the word speak to that. But vocation is, at its core, about the claim we each have felt by God as to how our gifts are to be utilized in a lifetime of service. It matters not whether it is within the confines of church-work or religious ministry. Vocation is how we choose to shine God’s light through our respective callings in life.

As Presbyterians, that is one of our core beliefs: that all people are called to service through their vocations. As a teacher or nurse, you are shining God’s light in your vocation of caring and nurturing. As a secretary or shift worker, you are shining God’s light in your vocation of administration and skilled labor. As a retiree or homemaker, you are shining God’s light in your vocation of presence and time. Whatever your “job” is, it is a vocation because through the time and skill and abilities you are utilizing, God is working through you to shine the light of Christ onto a troubled and needy world. It’s not something just for the pastor to do – it’s something we are all called to do as the Body of Christ.

As I mentioned earlier, though, discerning our vocation can be vexing for many of us. We are asked when we are in grade school, usually innocently, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” But then, in high school, when we start pondering post-graduation plans, we realize there is an expectation that we need to figure this all out, or else we might be left behind the crowd. We consider decisions about college or secondary-education will have life-long implications, and we hope that our instincts for what we choose to do will work out.

True, there are many who have a clear, unambiguous sense of their vocation early-on, and they act on that without any hesitation. But our families, our peers, and our culture can exact a great deal of pressure on us to decide what we’re going to do with the rest of our lives. And it can lead us to ask ourselves questions like, “What if I’m not happy or fulfilled doing this? How will I know if this is what I’m supposed to be doing? Where is God in all of this?”

Isaiah says today: “The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother’s womb he named me” (49:1). Notice, the prophet did not say, “The Lord told me exactly what I would do the rest of my life before I was born.” Instead, the prophet says, “The Lord called me before I was born, and he named me while I was in my mother’s womb.” We have never been alone in our walk of faith, for even before we were born God called us to life and to service. Our discernment of vocation and purpose is always grounded in this reality of

Isaiah's proclamation. And as we will see, that proclamation reminds us that, as individuals and as the church, our vocation is not self-serving; it is so that we may "be a light to the nations, that God's salvation may reach to the ends of the earth" (49:6).

Over the last few months, we've heard a lot from Isaiah, so we are familiar with his context. As Amy Oden puts it: *God's people have been defeated, their temple destroyed. They are taken in chains to Babylon, alienated from their land and their God. This exile is a crisis of identity and faith. Are they still God's people? How can they worship in this foreign land?*

Into this crisis, Isaiah speaks a word of hope . . . Isaiah shouts this news from the rooftops. If the first verse were an online blog, it would be in all caps. He has a message not for Israel alone, but for the whole world, even "you peoples far away" (verse 1). And this message is from God: God has raised up a servant, one hidden and unknown, a nobody. God has made this servant the instrument of God's glory (verse 3)

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1939).

There can be times when we feel that our life and vocation is not making a difference. People might criticize your organization, and you can take it personally, believing you are the reason for people's discontent. You can work tirelessly on a project over the course of a long period of time, but it is met with dissatisfaction or indifference, rather than hoped for inspiration and motivation. We've all been in those situations, and they can cause us to doubt and question our sense of call and vocation.

The prophet has felt it, too. "But I said, 'I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity'" (49:4). Surely the prophet has felt his efforts have been wasted at times. The people are stuck in exile, they refused to obey their Lord, and his efforts are all for not.

And yet – even in the most hopeless of situations – God offers hope. "Yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God." And his cause is one of hope for the people of Israel: "And now the Lord says, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him" (49:5). Even in this time of frustration, this time of laboring in vain, the Lord is using his servant in his vocation. When the prophet remembers who has claimed him before he was born, he is able to hear anew the Lord's voice for his life.

And the call he hears does not allow him to wallow in his self-pity or his comfort-zone. Stephanie Paulsell writes: *God says to the Servant, "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" (49:6). The vocation to which I first called you, God seems to say, is not everything I want from you. In the Servant's own return to God, a larger vocation is given: shine as a light to all the nations, so that there is nowhere my salvation does not reach. All of life is your business, God sings to the Servant – every nation, every person, every life* (*Feasting on the Word*,

Year A, Volume 1, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 246).

In other words, Israel, you might think it's enough when you are returned to your homeland, and your exile is over. But it's not enough. God has much

bigger plans in mind for you than what you see as your immediate predicament. God wishes for you to be a light to the nations, the hope for the world, and that will take much more than making it out of exile. Your vocation, O Israel, will be to shine the light of God to all the world, so that salvation might reach to the ends of the earth.

Consider that notion as it applies to us today. *God doesn't get stuck in the tidy resolutions to our crises that we think end the story. We often believe that if things turn out okay, the story is over. If the church makes budget, then "whew, thank God, that was close!" If we get through a health scare, we are humbled and grateful.*

Yet God is not done. These so-called endings are beginnings, each a new horizon of possibility. Not for ourselves alone, but for the world God loves.

*Restoration of individuals, or churches, or even of an entire people, is never only about that. God's healing work moves outward, always expanding toward eschatological fulfillment, "that my salvation may reach the end of the earth" (verse 6). God's story is always bigger than ours, holding our stories within God's life and weaving them into the wide-open future (Oden, *ibid*).*

There are many times when it's all we can do to make it through the day or hour ahead. Our child is faltering, our marriage is under strain, our loved one's health is failing, our job is overwhelming – it can be any number of crises. And when we make it through, when we get to the other side of that stress, we have a tendency to think, "Lord, enough already, just give me a bit of peace."

There are many times in the church's life that it's all we can do to make it through the week or day ahead. Members facing significant illness, individuals dying, financial strains, major events or plans which consume our time and energy – it can be any number of things. And when we make it through, when we get to the other side of those stresses, we have a tendency to think, in the church, "Lord, enough already, just give us a bit of peace."

But God's vision is wider than ours. God's vision is broader than ours. God's answer is, "That is too light a thing; you must shine your light to all the nations, so that my salvation may extend to the ends of the earth."

And it is because of our vocation – the claim God had on us when we were in our mother's womb – that we remember and give thanks. It is because of our vocation that we realize God will not only lift us through the immediate stress and strain, but also will carry us every day of our lives. It is because of our vocation that we understand that no matter who we are or what we do, our light matters to God – and it will provide hope and energy and courage to a world in such desperate need.

"For I am honored in the sight of the Lord, and my God has become my strength" (49:5).

Thanks be to God. Amen.