

Isaiah 49:1-6

Epiphany 3, January 22, 2023

Pastor Sam Rodebaugh

Listen to me, O coastlands, and give attention, you peoples from afar. The LORD called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name. ² 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. ³ And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." ⁴ But I said, "I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my right is with the LORD, and my recompense with my God." ⁵ And now the LORD says, he who formed me from 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 eyes of the LORD, and my God has become my strength-- ⁶ he says: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

Throughout our state, publicly funded schools are required to recite, every day, those words we all know by heart: *"I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."* That last phrase—*"with liberty and justice for all"*—those were the ideals our country was founded upon, that all citizens of this nation would have the right to freedom and justice, regardless of their gender or race or religion or any other differentiating factor.

And because our country believes in its democracy and those ideals, when there have been nations around the world ruled by tyranny and oppression, from time to time the United States will step into the fray—the goal being to bring democracy and freedom to the people of those nations as well. And of course, it doesn't always work. Sometimes the troops come home, and tyranny and oppression return almost immediately. Bringing "liberty and justice to all" proves to be a tall task.

But it's not impossible! (For one person, that is.) There is *One* and only One who gives liberty, true freedom which cannot be infringed upon. There is One and *only* One who dispenses justice, treating all people fairly. And this One truly does this "for all." He's identified in our text as the Lord's *"servant,"* He's named *"Israel."* You know Him as Jesus Christ. Today, we'll be considering the theme:

Christ Alone Comes

"With Liberty. . . and Justice. . . for All."

A couple months ago, Missionary Ohlmann and I were able to visit Washington, D.C. for the Southeast Pastoral Conference, and while we were there, we took in various presidential and war memorials around the city. There's one large memorial dedicated to those who served in WWII, and within that memorial, there is a quote carved prominently on a wall which is credited to George C. Marshall, who was the Chief of Staff of the United States Army during WWII. That quote goes like this: *"We are determined that before the sun sets on this terrible struggle, Our Flag will be recognized throughout the World as a symbol of Freedom on the one hand and of overwhelming force on the other."* And it's the type of memorial and the type of quote that really gives you goosebumps while you're reading it, makes you proud to be an American. And I think he was correct, that after WWII, the United States' position in the world did change, to be viewed both as a beacon of freedom and overwhelming force.

And it's also true that if a nation wants to maintain its liberty, typically it will need overwhelming force to do so. Consider the end of WWII—the War in the Pacific ended because America dropped the bombs. If Germany had instead been the first to harness the power of an atomic bomb, think of how differently world history would have played out. We see it all the time in wars—the nations with the biggest guns and the largest weapons and the most advanced technologies typically win. So, if the United States liberates a people from an oppressive regime, it uses overwhelming force to do so.

But it's not just world powers that rely on overwhelming force to get their way; we do the same, don't we? How often in our disagreements with others don't *we* drop the bomb? Through name calling, dredging up past wrongs, holding guilt over others' heads, raising our voices, or simply arguing with the sole purpose of having *our* argument heard and not with any interest in hearing the opposing point of view. We've all done that sort of thing. When we want our own personal liberty preserved, we like to do so through force, imposing ourselves upon others to get our way.

And how different is the approach of our Savior. Though having the absolutely overwhelming power of God at His disposal, **Christ Comes with Liberty** using simply His Word. You know, the saying goes that *"the pen is mightier than the sword,"* which means that you can convince people and change hearts through carefully chosen words better than you can through force. And it's *true*, but it's even *more* true when you're speaking about *Jesus' Word*. Throughout Scripture, God's Word is spoken of as a sword—sharp, powerful, living, and active, ***"piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."*** (Hebrews 4:12)

And in His quest to truly liberate the people of this world, the weapon He was given was that Word. As Jesus speaks through Isaiah, ***"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."*** Like a sharpened sword, Jesus uses His Word to cut through all of our illusions and delusions—those thoughts that we have enough goodness stored up in ourselves that we should be able to stand before a Holy God and receive His approval. With His sword, Jesus lays us bare, exposes the sin that we harbor within our hearts, so that we can do nothing but confess that we are sinners, that we do not deserve God's love.

And then, like a well-aimed arrow, Jesus answers with exactly the right word at exactly the right time. Like when a woman had been caught in adultery and brought before Jesus to be condemned, Jesus looked in the face of that repentant woman and had the right word for the occasion: ***"Neither do I condemn you;"*** He said, ***"Go, and from now on sin no more."*** (John 8:11) Or to the thief on the cross—condemned by the world as deserving *only* death—Jesus, seeing the faith in His heart, aimed a well-selected Word, saying, ***"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."*** (Luke 23:43)

This is how *Jesus* uses His Word, and this is how Jesus brings true liberty, true freedom. And He uses it the exact same way for *you*. For when you raise your prayers to the Lord, pleading for forgiveness, Jesus has well-aimed and carefully selected Words for you too. He assures you, ***"Take heart, my [child]; your sins are forgiven."*** (Matthew 9:2) And just as the Word of God did exactly what it said at creation, when ***"God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light,"*** (Genesis 1:3) so now when God says that your sins are forgiven, it is done. Your sins are taken away, the guilt that clings to you is removed so that it cannot condemn you any longer. Jesus *speaks*, and *you* are liberated.

Christ Alone Comes “With Liberty”—He uses His Word to do so—and He also comes to dispense **“Justice.”** You know, when nations get into wars with one another, while no one ever likes to be at war, we, as a people, can at least get behind them a little more when they are considered “just” wars. That’s why the distinction is made between “just” and “unjust” wars. When there is clearly an evil side, like the Nazis during WWII or the terrorism in recent times, then national pride swells and the war efforts are more readily supported.

But even when wars are considered “just” and declared for the sake of bringing liberty to the oppressed, there is *always* another intent behind them. Behind every war is the desire to extend one’s own nation’s influence. Just think about every earthly empire that’s ever existed. Quite clearly, those have always been about the furthering of the nation at the empire’s center. But in any given war, it’s always the same story. It’s always a desire to extend one’s own influence, one’s own ideals, gain new allies, get access to cheaper resources—it’s all about *me*. Every war—“just” or “unjust”—it’s about *my* desire for power and *my* glory. Even when a war can also be described as good for the other nation’s people, ultimately, it’s about us.

Well, Jesus has a similar imperial desire, to spread His name throughout the earth, to bring all people into His Kingdom. But for Jesus, it’s *really* about the people. And we see that in Christ’s willingness in our text to serve. Jesus is speaking through Isaiah, and says, **“And he (God the Father) *said to me, ‘You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.’*”** In Isaiah, we have these three sections called the “Suffering Servant Songs,” and they’re all about Jesus. One was our Old Testament reading last week: **“Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.”** (Isaiah 42:1) We have one here, and the other one is the one you know best, Isaiah 53: **“He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities.”** (Isaiah 53:5)

So, what is it that Jesus has come to be a servant for? Well, He tells us: **“You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.”** Israel was supposed to glorify God. They were supposed to shine the light of His Word to the nations so that people would come, leave behind their idols, and instead worship the true God. But that didn’t happen. Instead, far too often, the Israelites abandoned the true God to worship the false. They left the light to go into the darkness. And so now Jesus has come to be the *Israel* that Israel never was. He has come to bring God glory. And literally, what our text in Hebrew says is, **“You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will [glorify myself].”** So, the whole thread of thought is *“Israel did not glorify me, so I will come myself, and I will glorify myself.”* Which seems a little bit like the empires and kingdoms of this world who go out and war and conquer largely for their own glory.

But the difference is seen in *how* Jesus accomplishes this. To humans, the people that are in charge, the people that are the most powerful, the strongest nations, *are* the people that have figured out the best way to assert their own dominance, the best way to exert their own will, the best way to kill other human beings. That’s the way this world works. But Jesus is different. God’s glory is different. And we can see what God’s glory looks like when we listen to Jesus speak in the Gospel of John just before His death: **“Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you.”** (John 17:1) This is that way that the Father glorifies Himself—through the death of Jesus.

And so, Jesus came as the Servant, not just of the Father but to be the Servant of us all. Jesus came to

be despised and abhorred and rejected. And that reminds us of that other Suffering Servant Song: ***“He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.”*** (Isaiah 53:3) And the result of this is the Father’s glory.

This is why **Christ Alone Comes with Justice**. He gives justice to sinners. And unlike the kingdoms of this world, it is not at all about Himself; it is *truly* about us, His people. After all, as Jesus is described in the book of Acts: ***“In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.”*** (Acts 8:33) To bring justice to the you and to me, Jesus denied the same for Himself. He was treated in the most unjust way—not asserting His own dominance, not exerting His own will, making sure that no one else had to die for their sins. And through His suffering, we are presented before God in God’s courtroom as completely innocent on all charges. We are declared to be righteous before God. We are commended as never having done any bad thing and only ever doing that which is good. And we are invited, ***“Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”*** (Matthew 25:34)

Christ Alone Comes “With Liberty. . . and Justice. . .” and He does it **“for All.”** In our nation’s Pledge of Allegiance, we speak of “liberty and justice for all,” but it really only means “for all Americans.” And to be honest, many Americans are not convinced that those things are true for Americans either. As Christians, we would all likely agree that there are many unjust and immoral laws in our nation. Many would say that liberties continue to be infringed upon more and more as the years go on. Many would argue that justice is not dispensed equally, that not all people are treated fairly.

And again, this just stands in such stark contrast to how Jesus operates. God the Father speaks in our text and says, ***“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”*** We see here so clearly that ancient truth: ***“[God our Savior] desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”*** (1 Timothy 2:4) That ancient truth that ***“the Lord. . . is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”*** (2 Peter 3:9) And that’s good news for us, because if that were not the case, we’d certainly be on the outside looking in, separated from God forever due to our sin. Yet it was God’s good pleasure to make sure that you too could become members of the household of God.

Many people around the world do long to come to our nation, as it is seen as a land of opportunity, a land where liberty and justice are promised for all. And, we all know, many people around the world are not able to get their foot in the door. Certainly, we are blessed to be citizens of the United States of America, not in the least because here we have that freedom to come to God’s house and worship our Savior. But it is *His* nation, the household of God, that is the most blessed of all. For where the powers of this world fail, Christ does not. He comes with liberty, breaking the bonds of sin that snare us, granting freedom which cannot be taken away. He comes with justice, dispensing righteousness and salvation to those who would not have it otherwise. And He does this for all, which means that we are included. Already, you have your foot in the door, that is, the gateway of heaven. Thanks be to Jesus for making us members of the people of God, *His* holy nation. Amen. ***“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*** Amen.