

A Epiphany 2 1.19.20

Isaiah 49:1-7; John 1:29-42

Focus Statement: God is making a difference and we get to point to it.

I am fast becoming a fan of Dr. Juliana Claassens, the professor of Old Testament from the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa. Last Sunday I basically read her commentary on the Isaiah text to you. This week, her commentary started with what is apparently a famous quote from theologian Soren Kierkegaard, though I'd never heard it before, "the door to happiness opens outward."

Like last week our Isaiah reading for this morning places us among a people whose lives had been upended. Israel returned from the bonds of exile and is now trying to rebuild a community from the ruins. Which is a complicated place to be, because Israel is looking around, as one often does after a major disaster and finds itself faced with conflicting emotions. On one hand, they're back in Israel. The exile is over and they survived. Things are not as bad as they were, not as bad as they could have been. But on the other hand, things are pretty darn bad. In Isaiah we see a person who is trying to make sense of how both of these conflicting realities could be true, how there could be both gratitude and despair. If it is possible for one to recognize blessing and still honor loss.

Short answer, yes. Yes blessing and grief can co-exist. Yes you can be grateful that things are not as bad as they could be and devastated that things are as bad as they are. Just like we can in fact walk and chew gum at the same time, we have the capacity to be both thankful and heartbroken. The way through this is balance. It is not enough to wallow in the grief, but nor is it helpful to pretend the grief is not real and focus only on the positive.

And when faced with two extremes, sometimes the way to find balance is to introduce a third thing.

The thing God introduced for Israel was to turn their focus outward, Kierkegaard's door to happiness. As we talked about last week, when we are afraid or uncertain our natural human tendency is toward self-preservation. We look inward, trying to bolster our own resources, ensure our own survival. Some of us at least. Others of us try to live in total denial that the bad thing ever happened and focus only on the positive. Friends, hard truth, neither work.

You know how on a plane the flight attendant tells you to put on your own oxygen mask before assisting other people. That is great wisdom for within the confined space of an aircraft, you have to look out for yourself first or you will be unable to look out for others. Fortunately and unfortunately, in the vast open complexity of the world, the strategy of looking out for yourself first before assisting others is often not only inefficient, it more often than not will hasten your own destruction. Because outside of a closed system, we need each other. It is in fact impossible to be fully self-sufficient, to make sure you have everything you need before you help. And if you try, you'll miss the gifts others have to offer. Take our congregation for an example. The moment we decide we are too important to fail, that we have to make sure we have everything we need to ensure our own survival, that we have adequate resources, training, support, etc. for ourselves before we serve others, that is the moment our doors will shut. Yes, depending on the help, support, and resources of others, people we don't know, people who might be different than us, who

might challenge us, might change us, is scary. But the fact is God created us for each other, God created us to be in relationship with each other. So if you're on a plane, yes, put your oxygen mask on first. But when you're not, turns out the mask won't work if it isn't connected to another.

Now granted the people God was speaking to in Isaiah weren't on a plane, or for that matter had any idea what a plane was, but that was essentially God's message to Israel. The way to survive the upheaval of everything you knew is to reach out to others. Listen to the flow of this text. "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." So here we have Israel declared God's servant, in whom God will be glorified, hidden away. Think of the history of Israel. Way way back, Abraham had been promised his descendant would number the stars, and it was a rough road from then on. They ended up slaves in Egypt. God led them out of Egypt and established for them a nation. They wanted a king. God gave them Saul, he wasn't a winner. Then they got David, he was better but definitely still had his down moments. Israel split into two, the northern kingdom was destroyed, then the southern, and then the people went into exile. This history of struggle and failure is clear in verse four, "But I said, 'I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.'" Listen to the despair in that, God you said we were your people, we tried to do what you wanted, to remain faithful. But here we are, amidst the ruins of your city, Jerusalem your jewel now destroyed, so what was the point of it all. But God, who remember in verse three just

declared them to be God's servant, goes on: "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. [No,] I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

Friends, how would we live if we truly believed that? What would we do, who would we be, how would we live if we truly believed that the door to happiness, to fulfillment, to not just survival but satisfaction and faith and wholeness, lay in the opportunity to share with others? In this Isaiah text we have a God who says to us, you are not my servant, you are more than that. And this promise is not to Israel, it is wider than that. Friends to me that just feels like freedom because it means it's out of my hands. It feels like freedom, it feels like purpose, and it feels like trust.

Which brings us to John. First, just as a point of clarification, let's remember that John is a super common name in the Bible. You might remember from the Passion story on Good Friday there were three women all named Mary. Jesus' "mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleopas, and Mary Magdalene." The name John is like that. There's a million of them. So the John we're reading about in this story is not the same John who wrote the Gospel of John. So we've got John who, like I mentioned last week, is an important enough character to appear in all four Gospel accounts. But John in the Gospel of John differs from John in Matthew, Mark, and Luke in this way. In John's Gospel, John talks about baptism but we never actually see him baptizing. John's real role in John's Gospel is not baptizer but witness. John's job is to witness to who Jesus is, John baptizes in order to witness.

The John from John's Gospel is a great one to start Epiphany with because this John is one we can emulate. Obviously, the call to travel to the wilderness to begin a mission of baptizing people in the river and eventually baptize the son of God himself is not something we can all aspire to. But we can all aspire to do what John does in this text, we can all aspire to witness. We can all aspire to look for the presence, the action, the spirit of God in the world and to say, "Look, here is the Lamb of God."

Pointing out God's presence in the world may seem so simple, too simple, to matter. But look how this story unfolded. Jesus' first disciples did not begin to follow because Jesus called them. They were not impressed with Christ's message or transformed by his power. Jesus didn't heal them or feed them or even speak to them. Verse thirty-five: "John was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus." One of those two turned out to be Andrew, who brought his brother Simon, soon to be called Peter. Then through Andrew and Simon, Jesus met Philip, and Philip brought Nathanael, and you see where this is going, a long string of witnesses across time and space that leads all the way to us. All because John said, "Look."

Dear friends in Christ, our witness matters. Our words matter. When we speak out against injustice, when we lift our voices to point out God's presence, when we support each other, when we serve our neighbor, these things change things. Verse thirty-seven is the last appearance John makes in the Gospel of John, as he watched his own disciples walk away from him at his own command. We know from the synoptics that John won't even live to

see the resurrection, so it is very likely that John never knew the impact his words, his witness had on the world. But we know that they did, for we gather today as heirs of that first call to look and to follow.

So again, the same question the Isaiah text left us with, in Epiphany we become witnesses to the presence of Christ in the world. What would you do if you truly saw Christ? And what will you do now that you have? Amen.