

“A Bigger Assignment”

Isaiah 49: 1-7

There is a conversation in this passage. First, the Prophet complains to the people of Israel. Then, the prophet reports on the conversation between the Prophet and God. This conversation between them had not gone at all the way the Prophet had thought it would.

It never does. We can plan our conversations, but the other person does not usually say what we want.

The Prophet was called by God, to be a spokesman, from God, to the Chosen People of Israel. The message to give them was that they needed to turn to God, and worship and obey God. Often, the Chosen People needed this message, as most people do. Often the Chosen People found themselves in situations full of many temptations, as most people do, including us.

The Prophet was bemoaning his failures in his work: “I’ve worked for nothing. I’ve nothing to show for a life of hard work.” (The Message version of the Bible)

Even so, the Prophet was willing to go by what God said: “Nevertheless, I’ll let God have the last word. I’ll let Him pronounce the verdict.” (Message)

A good thing, too, because God’s response was completely unexpected. In verse 6, God says, “But that’s not a big enough job for my servant— just to recover the tribes of Jacob, merely to round up the strays of Israel. I’m setting you up as a light for the *nations* so that my salvation becomes *global!*” (Message)

“Now wait a minute, God. I just told you how hard I had worked, and how unsuccessful I had been in calling the nation of Israel to straighten up and be faithful to You. So, why are You giving me a bigger assignment, not just Israel, the Chosen People? I can’t even succeed at the first assignment!”

Okay, I made that last part up, myself. But it could very well have been what the Prophet thought.

Well, as we know, and are always being reminded, God doesn’t see things the way we do. God can and does see the whole picture. At that time, God may have seen that the Prophet’s efforts in working to call Israel back to faithful belief and

behavior may have been a matter of planting seeds that take root and grow later, slowly.

Or, it may be that God had been getting the Prophet warmed up on Israel, before the Big Project of the whole world. After all, Israel is small in area, compared to the world. Maybe Israel was for practice.

More than that, God's heart and God's love are huge! Way big enough for all the people, all the countries.

I think that may be it. God's great love goes far beyond one country. That needed to be said, back then, in the Bible times. For that matter, there are many places in the Bible, Old and New Testaments, which do say that.

Still they needed the reminder. It needed to be said repeatedly and often. That is because the people of Israel tended to think of God as their very own God, and no one else's. Kind of like the toddler attitude of MINE.

There are two reasons for that kind of thinking. For one thing, the Jewish people, God's own Chosen People of Israel, were surrounded, geographically, by pagan countries. Each pagan country had its own distinct "set" of pagan gods and goddesses, you might say.

There were the Roman set, the Greek set, the Egyptian set, the Babylonian set, and so on and so forth. These pagan gods were limited by territory. And of course, they were false gods, merely man-made idols. Even so, Israel tended to follow suit about the territorial aspect of their pagan neighbors.

The other reason for this thinking is NOT because of the ancient practices and ways of thinking. Oh, no. The other reason is just that faulty human nature—then and now, and all the time in between.

It is our human nature to want to think and believe that God loves us and our group of folks best. We can even go so far as to just discount everyone else. Say, we don't like a certain group of people, or don't think that bunch is important. We carry on with that attitude, and find ourselves thinking that God shares our opinions, and that God loves us and only us. Unfortunately, that mind-set is alive and well, even now in 2020.

No one is beyond God's love—unless he or she deliberately refuses God. Even then, God keeps at it, and tries to reach such a person's heart.

So, yes, why shouldn't God give the Prophet the whole job, and make God's salvation go global?

Now, I am going to jump ahead in time. This bigger assignment which the Prophet was given got moved over to someone more capable of doing it. This assignment, of God's world-wide, universal, global love and salvation, got give to Jesu, God's own Son, hundreds of years after these words in the book of Isaiah.

Jesus was sent as a light to the nation. Jesus is even called the Light of the World. And don't the nations of this world need some light!

Even now, when you would think we could have figured out how to get things right, there are wars, over land and power. There are mistreated children and innocents. There are people who don't get enough to eat, and at the same time, there is great waste of food. That is what people do to each other and other countries.

Then look at what we do to ourselves, and our own countries. We harm our own bodies—with food and/or liquor and/or drugs, and/or tobacco and/or vaping. We pollute our land and water and air. Sometimes we really are our own worst enemies.

I could go on and on, but you get my drift. We need someone to light the way, and show us what to do.

Thanks be to God, we have that someone. He is Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

Now, we say that a lot, Lord and Savior. And it sounds great. But I think we are not putting enough emphasis on the "Lord" part, just the "Savior" part.

We are very glad to be saved; but we are less eager to have Jesus be the Lord over us, the one in charge of us. But we need it. We need to be living by Jesus' ways. We need him as our Lord, our Ruler. Human nature and luck are just not going to do it for us, much less for the whole world.

We need to do what Jesus said—Love God. Love one another. Love ourselves. This love is not a matter of words only, and it is not just the romantic kind of love.

Love, in this case, means being respectful and doing what is good and right, with people and with the world. It means appreciating and taking care of this place and these lives we have. It means honoring God by the way we live.

One thing to remember is that we need God's help in all of this, and that God gives us this help and guidance. It is not just a matter of gritting our teeth and trying hard, on our own. God is with us and giving us strength and ability.

The thing is, when we do this, when we are leading noticeably true Christian lives, following Jesus' lead, we become a light for the world. That's right! US!

How about that. We, the Christians, can be a light to the world. WE can be, bear with me, here, an advertisement for Christianity.

Or maybe the right word is ambassador for Christianity. That would mean that everywhere we go, we are presenting and promoting the Christian faith in how we act and live, how we talk, how we deal with people.

It may not be easy. But it is needed. This poor old world really does need light, God's love and forgiveness and salvation. Jesus offers these to everyone, and we can help spread the word and turn on the light. Amen.

Preached by Reverend Sally J. DeMasters, January 19, 2020.