

Is Your Light On? Isaiah 49:1-7

What a beautiful and challenging scripture we have before us today. In it, Isaiah talks about how God chose him and made him as a sharp sword and a polished arrow. But having said that, Isaiah still feels discouraged, because he feels like he has let God down. "I have labored in vain," he says, "I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity." Then Isaiah puts himself in God's hands, "My reward, my pay for my work, is in your hands, O God." Taking that into account God then does an amazing thing. Even after hearing Isaiah's confession of failure, God does not chide Isaiah or even try to comfort him with words of grace and forgiveness. No, God instead says, "It is too small a thing to just send you to the tribes of Jacob. I am going to make you a light to the nations." Instead of reducing Isaiah's responsibilities, instead of calling someone else, God expands Isaiah's mission to the ends of the earth. Wow!

Isaiah accepts amazing God's promise, "Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall bow down.", But Isaiah does so with great realism. You see, like all prophets, Isaiah is not treated well by the people in power; the people to whom he brings God's message. Listen to how Isaiah refers to himself, "Thus says the Lord, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers." That is how Isaiah sees himself: despised, abhorred, and a slave to the very people he speaks to, because often the rulers will have the prophets in their house, under their command, so they can simultaneously ignore the prophet's words and keep the prophet from stirring up the people.

It is so appropriate that we read this scripture on the weekend we remember Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It is appropriate because, even though we as a nation celebrate and honor him now, in his lifetime he was, like Isaiah, despised and hated by some, and was seen as a person to be controlled by the powerful of the nation. From 1955 until 1965 this great man of faith was jailed over 30 times in different places for leading peaceful protests. In that same time period, starting with a bombing of the house where his wife and young daughter waited from him to come home from a meeting, there were dozens of plots to kill him. Many were foiled. Most failed because of "luck" or God's grace depending how you view it, that is until he was finally shot and killed on April 4th, 1968. We do ourselves and our nation no good to remember only the words of his lofty speeches without the knowledge that every time he spoke, every time he walked out a door, the possibility of a violent death was very real.

Why was this? What message did the Rev. Dr. King bring, what light did he shine not only on our nation, but on all nations that caused him to be hated? We know he fought for racial equality, but that, was a natural outgrowth of a far deeper belief and message. The message of the total connectivity of all humanity. An interdependence that makes doing any violence to another an act of self-destruction. This message grew out of the teaching of Jesus and saw it in the work of Mohandas Gandhi, who, following the words of Jesus, attempted the peaceful healing of the rift between Muslim and Hindu in Asia. This is why in his later years Rev. Dr. King spoke out against the war in Vietnam, because he preached always that no good thing can ever result if violence is the means to achieve it.

This becomes clear in a Christmas essay Rev. Dr. King wrote for McCall's Magazine in 1966 entitled, *A Gift of Love*. It honestly reveals both his commitment to non-violence and what kind of man he was. The language is archaic in our day, but know some of the words we would find offensive today were not offensive in 1966:

This Christmas I remember the little black children of Grenada, Mississippi, beaten by grown men as they walked to school. I remember a young negro murdered by a gang in Cicero, Illinois, where he was looking for a job; and a white minister in Georgia, forced out of his sacred office for speaking up for human dignity.

This I remember, especially in this season of giving, for these people have followed the example and spirit of Christ himself. They have given mankind a priceless "Gift of Love."

I am thinking now of some teenage boys in Chicago. They have nicknames like "Tex" and "Pueblo" and "Goat" and "Teddy." They hail from the slums. Forsaken by society, they once proudly fought for street gangs. But this year they gave us all the gift of non-violence, which is indeed a gift of love. I met these boys and heard their stories at the slum apartment I rent on the West Side Ghetto of Chicago. At times I shared their despair and felt a hopelessness that these young Americans could ever embrace the concept of non-violence....

The Freedom movement has tried to bring a message to boys like Tex. First we explained the violence can be put down by armed might... that physical force can never solve the underlying social problems. Second, we promised them we could prove, by example, that non-violence works. These young people agreed last winter to give non-violence a test.

Then came the very long, very tense, hot summer of 1966, and the first test for many Chicago youngsters: the Freedom March through Mississippi. Gang members went there in carloads.

Those of us... in the movement for years were apprehensive about the behavior of the boys. Before the march ended they were to be attacked by tear gas. They were to be called upon to protect women and children with no other weapon than their own bodies. To them it would be a strange and possibly nonsensical way to respond to violence. But they reacted splendidly. They learned in Mississippi, and returned to teach in Chicago, the beautiful lesson of acting against evil by renouncing force.

And in Chicago, the test was sterner. These marchers endured not only the filthiest kind of verbal abuse, but also rocks and eggs and cherry bombs. They did not reply in words or violent deeds. Once again, their only weapon was their own bodies. I saw boys like Goat leap into the air to catch with their bare hands the bricks and the bottles that were sailed toward us.

It was through the Chicago marches that our promise to them - that non-violence achieves results - was redeemed, and their hope for a better life was rekindled. For they saw in Chicago that a humane police force could defend the exercise of constitutional rights. They saw that hatred could and should be confronted and dealt with. They saw, in the very heart of a great city, that men of power could be made to listen to.. the call for freedom and justice.

Boys like Teddy, a child of the slums, saw all this because they decided to rise above the cruelties of those slums and to work and march, peacefully, for human dignity. They revitalized my own faith in non-violence. And these poverty-stricken boys enriched us all with a gift of love.

Rev. Dr. King believed that we all have the capacity to be non-violent. That we all have in us a God-Given strength to love, not necessarily like, but love all, even those who may hate us. The moral power of the Civil Rights Movement was not found exclusively in the exceptional person of Martin Luther King, Jr., but the power to change came from all the people that stood up non-violently to say, "it is time for change." People like Teddy and Goat, mothers and grand-mothers, people of all skin colors and socio-economic status, Protestants and Catholics, Jews and Gentiles, Muslims and Atheists, young and old and everything in between.

Rev. Dr. King's message of unity, of interdependence, of tolerance, of love, offers us a remedy to the deep divisions in our nation and in our world. Maybe it is the only thing that can overcome the suspicion, self-centeredness, and apathy. There are many things that are so much better now than when Rev. Dr. King was alive. We would be remiss were we not to celebrate great progress in the 50 years since his death. But we still have a long way to go. And we, like Martin Luther King, Jr.... like Isaiah, and like Jesus may have to, with no weapon other than love, take risks and make some people mad. Light does that sometimes to people, especially when it shines on our human failings and our character defects. Light bringers have a dangerous task in a world that sometimes prefers the comfort of darkness and gloom. May God give us the courage and wisdom to bring the Light of God's Love and the unity of all to a fractured and broken world. AMEN

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."