

A Purpose Beyond Ourselves

By: Keith Holste

January 16, 2011. The prophet Isaiah told the downtrodden people of Israel that they were to be a light to the nations, that they had a purpose beyond themselves to bring God's salvation to the ends of the earth. Years later Jesus took up the mantle of this mission, and called others to help him. In his sermon today, Pastor Keith reminds us of that mission we too have, to go beyond ourselves, to serve God's purpose and to be lights to the nations.

*** Transcript ***

Today for our meditation we look at our first lesson today, from Isaiah 49. We begin in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

After World War II, things could have gone differently than they did. We as a country could have come home, having won a victory at a great cost to us, and just concentrated on getting the country back going again, gotten back to business, licked the wounds and focused on putting as much as we could to in the country here. And indeed, lots and lots of that was done. But after the war we also paid attention to other parts of the world. The Marshall Plan was enacted to rebuild Europe. We spent a lot of time and energy in Berlin, flying food in for the people in Berlin, and doing other rebuilding in Asia and in Europe. It wasn't all altruistic, and that had a lot to do with fighting the encroachment of communism, and had to do with restoring the world economy and getting things in the whole world going again. But still, we didn't have to do that. We could have just stayed home and said we'll pay attention to what's within our borders and get things really strong here, and not pay attention to the rest of the world.

In our first lesson of the day, from Isaiah, we hear of the person writing this -- Isaiah -- who is very sensitive to the great hardship his people are coming through, and the plight that they're in as they are in exile in Babylon. But we also hear him have words of vision and hope for them, and even a mission. Even while they're in this plight and it seems like the world is too tough for them, he ups the ante. He says God has even more in mind for you. Isaiah writes this as though it's two people talking, as though Israel is a person talking with God. But Israel represents the whole people, and so even though it's like a dialogue between two people, it's between the nation and God. And so when he writes, "Before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb, he named me," this is meaning the whole people of Israel. God had something in mind for them as a people, before they even were a people. But he has a very personal way of talking with them.

He's saying that even before they became a nation, God had a mission in mind for them, and a vision in mind for them. God had a purpose in mind for them. Isaiah knows full well that the people of Israel had violated most of God's rules, if not all of them, when they were back in Jerusalem. As a prophet, he had warned them of the consequences of their behavior, that they had trusted treaties and armaments too much, and their security systems and things like that. And they had gone after false gods. He knew about all that and warned them about shaping up, but they hadn't. So he watched them not heed these rules of God and warnings, and be defeated and be dragged off to Babylon. And he knows what kind of suffering that they're in now. But knowing that suffering, he is able to bring words of vision and hope. And even while they're down, even while they're in this time of wondering if they'll ever survive again or not, he says, I have words of a great mission for you. God has a purpose for you, from before you were a people. He wants you to be a light to the nations. And so God has a purpose in mind for you. He will take you back. But don't get comfortable. Know that you have a mission to perform.

They were in those awful circumstances. They weren't at home. They had been given lots of trouble by foreign rulers. They were captives and prisoners of war. How could God have a mission in mind for them? They were downtrodden. But down and out as they are, he says you really are the hidden arrow in the quiver. You are a shiny, silver arrow in the quiver. You are to be a light to the nations. God's saving you, so to speak, for the right time when he pulls out his best arrow and sends it to bring the world around. They would have likely been content just to come home from war, rebuild the country, rebuild the temple, get their city together, get their country together, get their people together. They'd endured so much at the hands of the Babylonians. Why couldn't they just come home and live in peace? But Isaiah says no, that's too light a thing. Just to put life together again would not live up to the purpose that God has in mind for you. It's too light a thing, Isaiah says, that you should be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and restore the survivors of Israel, just to put things back together. That's not enough. Just collecting everyone and restoring every one of the people: that's not enough. God says through Isaiah, you will be a light to the nations. I will give you to the nations as a light, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth. God has a purpose in mind for them. They can't just go home and be family or be country or be nation. No, they have a purpose beyond themselves to bring God's salvation to the ends of the earth.

God has in mind for Israel, coming back from losing a war, a much greater mission than just to come home and get healed. They are to be the healing force for the world. Small nation as they are, beaten up as they are, they are to be the silver arrow that will solve the difficulties of the world. We talk in our age about silver bullets. They are to be the silver, shining arrow that would solve the world's problems. But for them to do this, they had to get beyond themselves. They are chosen for a mission beyond themselves. God has a mission in mind for them. They can't just go home and be isolationist. They need to reach out and show the world the kind of healing, loving, and saving God that they have.

Well, this is the message that Jesus is reviving when he is baptized. Five hundred years later or so, Jesus is on the scene. He remembers this word from Isaiah. This word from Isaiah is still a mission of the people of Israel and it's his mission. He is taking on the mantle of the mission of God, showing himself to be the light of the world. He is baptized and anointed by John the Baptist as the beloved Son of God, chosen to do his Father's will. Today, we hear him pick up this task now. He begins to do this work of teaching, going about, talking to people. He is the embodiment of Israel. And so he invites Peter and Andrew to come and see what he's about, what Israel is about, and what they are to be about. God has a purpose in mind for them. Jesus will radiate the light of God, through his teaching, through his actions, through his healing, through his preaching. He will show what it means to be a light to the nations. But it doesn't stop with him. They are part of this mission.

Jesus' mission was, of course, beyond himself. He could have just come, I supposed, to be a demonstration of what a person loving God is like. He could have settled down in a town, married, had children, and been a good community person and shown what it is to be a good follower of God, to be a demonstration of a God person. But that wasn't his purpose. The purpose of Jesus was to go beyond himself. His mission was not to serve himself, but to serve God by carrying out God's purposes for him and for his people. Just as the people of Israel had to suffer, he had to suffer. He was required what was needed to give up himself for the sake of the world. He prayed that there might be some other way. He prayed Lord, if there's some other way, let this cup pass from me. But the only way open to him was the way of the cross. He needed to get beyond himself, outside of himself, even to give up himself.

Over the past decade a very popular book has been *The Purpose Driven Life*, by Rick Warren. And one of his themes is that God doesn't put us on earth just to serve ourselves. We have a purpose, given by

God. Our natural inclination is to serve ourselves and to find happiness that way. As Martin Luther called it, sin is being curved in on ourselves, not being outward in our thinking but being inward and seeing everything as coming back to us. Instead of being lights to the world or healers or servants to the others, we tend to look at ourselves first. Look out for ourselves first. Our inclination is to have a nice nest, to pad it well, and to be comfortable. By our baptisms we have drowned the kind of life that that selfishness represents, and we're chosen ones now to live for the sake of all nations. Go and baptize all nations, we are told. We are the ones who go out. But so often we don't get that right. Daily we don't get that right. Daily we go back to our selfish inclination, that "me first" kind of thinking. But daily, God forgives us and reminds us of the mission to go beyond ourselves to serve his purpose and to be lights to the nations.

There is a Lutheran pastor and consultant who blends systems theory and theology, and his name is Peter Steinke. Maybe some of you know him or know of him. He's often called in where congregations are in deep distress, or having conflict or some sort of deep trouble, as a consultant. And he's written some books based on his experiences with the congregations. Usually his more recent books capture the idea that he's come up with and discovers time and time again, that health comes from having a focus from outside oneself. This works whether you're a person, or whether you're a family, or whether you're a congregation. You need to have a focus outside yourself to have real health yourself. And this echoes a former bishop of mine. More often than once I heard him proclaim in speeches and so forth that when he came to work with congregations, he would judge whether they were a dying congregation or a lively and thriving congregation, about how their stance was. Did they seem to just exist for themselves, to keep themselves going, keep the building open and lights on, and have their own little happy club? Or were they existing for the sake of the community around them and the world around them? Did they have a mission beyond themselves that would unify them, bring them together, and help them serve the world around them? That brought a unity and a liveliness to them. That's how he would determine if a congregation was thriving or dying, if it was healthy or not. He and Steinke think a lot alike.

We all know people who seem to have no purpose outside themselves. They think about themselves all the time. Most of the conversation is either what they've done or what's ailing them, and they themselves are their only focus. They don't get out much and interact with other people much. And their problems seem to grow, because they have no life-giving focus outside themselves. Families are healthier too when there's a focus beyond the family system, when there's life outside, a realization that family exists in a community, and we've received from the community and we need to give back to the community. There's a mission to the community and a mission for the things that we believe in as a family. That makes a family stronger, as they unite behind the mission that the family has. Then congregations: if we turn in on ourselves, we have departed from the purpose that we've been given by God. We lose the nature of who we are, given by God. We become something we were never intended to be. By our God-given nature, by the vision that God has had us from before we were a congregation even, God had in mind that the people of his congregations would be lights to the nations. We are to be lights shining out, not trying to keep all the energy in for ourselves, but to share that energy with a purpose.

This weekend, we honor the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I'm sure there were many nights, including his last night in Memphis, when he would have been happier just to be at home with Coretta and the kids. It would have been a much more simple life for him. But he felt like he had a call from God for his country, which kept the focus from being just on his own self and just on his own happiness. But he had a mission for the health of the country, for his people: that there might be racial equality. It was a costly mission, as it cost him his life. The entire goal wasn't accomplished and his

mission still requires work. But his mission was the way he spent himself knowing he was a chosen one of God, given a purpose by God, and giving his energy and his life for the sake of many. Isaiah put this image before his people, which was lived out by Jesus and is passed on now to us: that we are chosen by God. God chooses us for the sake of God's mission -- that God's salvation, God's health, may reach to the ends of the earth. We thank God that we are chosen, that we are saved, that we're baptized, that we have a purpose beyond ourselves, given to us by God. Amen.

And now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

*** Keywords ***

2011, Christ Lutheran Church, Webster Groves, sermon, podcast, transcript, Pastor Keith Holste, Isaiah 49:1-7, Servant's Mission, John 1:29-42, The Purpose Driven Life, Rick Warren