

Moving from exile to hope...that's the gospel story, isn't it? Several of you have wondered when we're going to get back to the New Testament, in particular the Gospels, in worship. The Narrative Lectionary has us returning to the NT next week. Nonetheless, this time of expectation and waiting in Advent is also captured well in some Old Testament texts, especially those that anticipate the future reign of God. Because when you're in exile or you're broken, hope can seem all but lost. The same goes for peace. A little background- the book of Isaiah is broken down into three distinct sections- First Isaiah, chapters 1-39, Second Isaiah, the middle portion in chapters 40-55, and Third Isaiah, chapters 56-66. Second Isaiah is where we find our scripture passage for today. It is poetry of comfort and restoration that creates a world of possibility for Israel. And this particular section of scripture is known as **the first of the four Servant Songs in Isaiah** (49:1-13, 50:4-11, and 52:13-53:12). In the book of Isaiah, the Israelites have rebelled against God by worshiping other gods, among many other things. In the first 39 chapters, there are consequences for the Israelites' choices, devastation that they themselves invite "by defying God," and challenges given to them to live more holy lives. There is a gap, if you will, between First Isaiah and Second/Third Isaiah. Second & Third Isaiah- chapters 40-66- burst wide open with promises of God's presence and comfort (hope), despite the Israelite's behavior (exile) in First Isaiah. Before delving in to the first servant song in Second Isaiah, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ. Isaiah 42:1-9.**

In today's scripture, there is a mention of a chosen servant. Who is this servant? Scholars argue over the interpretation of who this servant is. Some say that the servant is "Israel." Others think that this "servant" could be an unknown individual. However, some Christians have chosen to interpret this servant as "Jesus in anticipation" (Brueggemann, Intro to OT, pg. 168). Since Jesus lived as a model Israelite in his time, it makes sense to understand him in terms of these passages without excluding the earlier understanding of the prophet's readers. Several times in the Gospels Jesus quotes these words from Isaiah (eg. Matthew 12:15-21, Luke 4). In this scholarly debate, I think we can say "without an ounce of exaggeration, that this servant is not only the hope of Israel, but also of the whole world" (Michael J. Chan, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). I think we can fairly say that there's room in the ambiguity to wonder. Scripture reveals that this chosen servant "has God's spirit upon him" and he will "bring forth justice to the nations" (Isa. 42:1b). This servant is a quiet leader who has compassion for the broken ("bruised reeds") and the weak ("dimly burning wicks"). "The ministry of the servant is what it looks like when the Kingdom of God arrives anywhere, anytime- whether that by the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, or the 21<sup>st</sup> century CE. When the servant arrives, so do justice, light, and freedom. The servant is a 'new covenant shed for you and for all people,' the 'new thing' that God is doing" (Chan).

However, it still "isn't clear whether the subject of all these actions is the servant or God. Though traditional Christian translations attributed these to the servant (often read as Jesus), all healing power ultimately

comes from God” (*CEB Study Bible*). Therefore, what if these words of scripture are a commissioning? An act of entrusting or giving authority to perform specific duties- not only to this chosen servant but to all the children of Israel? The prophet Isaiah “invites Jacob’s descendants to take on the identity, self-understanding, and roles of leaders from the nation’s past” (*CEB Study Bible*). He reminds them to be about the mission of establishing justice in the earth. You see the servant’s primary role, like those of the earlier kings, is to administer justice- not just over one nation but over nations. It’s not only justice but also healing and teaching as well. This is a commissioning- not only for the children of Israel- but for you and for me. God reminds the people of Israel that they have been provided and cared for by God-always. They have not been forgotten, though they are in exile. God commissions saying, “I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness” (Isa. 42:6-7). I’ve been thinking a lot about these words of commissioning to be a light to the nations. Light is a curiously fascinating subject and is used metaphorically in both the Old and New Testaments. Now, I am no scientist, but one scholar notes that interestingly, “light has a deeper meaning, as it’s at least one dimension different from other quantities. For example, if we are in a small heated room in a large cold building we will want to take care that the door remains closed, lest the heat escape into the hallway. Imagine if someone knocks on the door and asks that we keep it open so that they can share the heat. That would be a foolish thing to do. We would do better to invite the person in to share its

warmth. Now change the story slightly. Imagine that temperature is no longer the issue. Imagine that our room is the only one in the building with working lights. Now if someone asks us to open the door to share the light out into the hallway, we would have no need to hesitate. Whatever light is in the room will not diminish by throwing the door open. Unlike heat or air-conditioned air or food or money or nearly anything else, light can be shared without lessening those doing the sharing. Another property of light is that it does not exist for its own sake alone. In other words, the point of turning on a light in a dark room is not so that everyone may stare at the light fixture. Rather, the light makes it possible for people to see other things that would be invisible to them otherwise” (Rebecca Abts Wright, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). Light can also reach or come from places we think are impossible. Songwriter and theologian, Leonard Cohen, in his song, *Anthem*, beautifully says, “Forget your perfect offering, there is a crack in everything, but that is where the light gets in.” Yes, God’s grace and power work exactly there where we are broken, where we are most fragile. Here’s where our vulnerability enters the scene and can be light for others in powerful ways. Yes, especially in our brokenness, God invites us to be the light as we make a difference in the lives of others around us. Think about it. If you’ve been wandering around in exile, who better to witness to the reality and struggles of life than you? If you’ve experienced light in the midst of the shadows, who better to share of God’s provision than you? If you’ve experienced being a “bruised reed” or a “dimly burning wick,” who better to share with those in the dungeon or prison? The times that I’ve experienced the presence of Christ most were when I sat with

those who have hit the depths of exile-trying to seek hope in a God who has not abandoned them. They need someone to remind them who and whose they are. It sounds weird but the times I've been in exile, and I've sat with those in exile, I've experienced the hope and peace of God in the smallest, clearest ways. I've also witnessed many of you having these sprigs of hope and moments of peace in the midst of experiencing exile. Yes, here "the prophet offers a vision of the world in which an individual or a group of people in the midst of brokenness, in spite of brokenness, and maybe even because of the brokenness, will be a light to the nations" (Juliana Claassens, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)).

You see, God is a God who constantly moves us out of exile as we live into hope. Even if you're asking yourself, "How can I be light?," I want to invite you to reflect on what keeps you in the shadows? What does it look like to walk toward the light of the world, Jesus Christ, and receive the light? For God is always doing a new thing. Hear again what God says through the prophet Isaiah. "I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols" (Isa. 42:8). "See the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare, before they spring forth, I tell you of them" (Isa. 42:9). God is offering the Israelites hope while they are in exile that God is God and that they're being commissioned to be servants. Even though they're in exile, they are to cling to hope. Even when they feel that they're too broken or too weak, God breathes new life into the people of Israel. Even though they're/we're wandering in the dark, God commissions us to bring light to the nations. Even though they've been blind in the past, God invites

them to help open the eyes of those who are blind. Yes, in a way you can say that it's the blind leading the blind. Even though they've been prisoners (figuratively and literally), God frees them to bring out the prisoners from the dungeons/prisons. "Sometimes the end of blindness may not be medical at all, but merely the addition of light to the situation. Remember that seeing is not always a physical sense. For example, 'I see what you mean.' Nevertheless, whatever light we may bring to a situation might be in the service of understanding more than a change in anyone's physical abilities" (Wright). We can show that there is life to live- a life filled with servanthood and hope and light.

But some of you may be asking how will we ever move from exile to hope? For us as followers of Christ, we follow the light of the world, through the power of the Holy Spirit. In other words, we don't just sit and wait for Christ's return. Like Pastor Amanda said last week, in Advent and in all seasons in the church, we actively wait for the Second coming. And while waiting, we are to be Christ's light, as we serve others. Yes, we're to be the light. With God's help we are willing bruised reeds and dimly burning wicks- servants of God- hands and feet of Christ. "And oh how I wish the 'new things' God is getting ready to declare could include outbreaks of covenant living. If only we could see that the prisons from which we need to be set free include the prison cells of our selfishness. If only the blindness from which we are healed could be our love of the shadows. If only God's light would help us to see that violence is never the best solver of problems" (Wright). Friends, may we recognize Christ's light in ourselves and in each other so that

we can go and be the light- living into the hope of the new things God is doing amongst us- not as perfect people but as redeemed bruised reeds and dimly burning wicks commissioned, fed, and sent out by a loving and grace-filled God! Amen.

Prayer:

God of light, you sent a Savior into the world to bring justice and release to all who are in bondage. Empower us, especially in our brokenness, to be your light. Show us how to bring justice and peace to all who suffer. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, the light of the world. Amen.