“A Light to the Nations”  
Scripture – Isaiah 49:1-6  
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones  
Sunday, October 6, 2013

Have you experienced a time when you felt all was lost and you could not imagine anything beyond a dark future? Perhaps your job was eliminated or your career sabotaged. Or you faced public humiliation or your marriage failed. You may have experienced an illness of the mind or you were brutalized by another. Perhaps a disagreement wrenched apart your family or a loved one died.

If you can remember traversing the valley of the shadow of death – or perhaps you feel mired in this valley today – then you understand the plight of the Hebrew people in this morning’s passage.

The Hebrews had been trounced in battle and forcibly marched to Babylon. Their cities had been leveled and their way of life destroyed. Decades passed while they lived in this foreign land. Their faith and their traditions withered as an increasing number assimilated into Babylonian culture. In time, their distinctive faith would become a distant memory, the Mosaic Law all but forgotten.

At this dark moment, the prophet Isaiah emerged to make a startling announcement. Most of those who had known those first horrific days of being dragged from their homes had been buried by now. Those who had been children when the ordeal began were now the silver-haired. Many had lost their faith because it seemed apparent that God had deserted them in the hour of their greatest need.

At this critical juncture when each morning looked like midnight and each meal tasted like bitter herbs, the prophet Isaiah announced that God was about to do something new. They would be allowed to return home to reconstruct their cities, to rebuild their lives and to rejuvenate their hopes.

Isaiah said that even though they feel as if they have been overlooked and forgotten, they have been like an arrow that has been tucked away in a quiver for a future purpose. Isaiah told them that God had plans for pulling this arrow from its case and using it.

Surely most were skeptical of the prophet. Can you hear the doubters ridiculing him? “Face the facts. We’re not going home. The good old days are gone. This is our life now and we might as well make the best of it.”

However, Isaiah was confident that not only would they return and rebuild, but that God had an extraordinary mission for them. Speaking through the prophet, God said, “It is not enough 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.”
God did not declare that they would once again become a force to be reckoned with – a nation that would triumph over its foes. Rather God challenged them to serve as a beacon of light to illuminate the path that leads to well-being and abundance. The Hebrew people were accustomed to thinking of Yahweh as their own personal God, as opposed to the gods of other nations, but Isaiah was declaring that there is but one God, and all tribes, all races, all people fall within God’s providential care.

Six centuries later, a babe was born in Bethlehem and the people were again living in despair. Now the Roman Empire was their nemesis; occupying their land, restricting their movement and taxing them into poverty. Joy was a rare commodity. The people longed for the Messiah to save them.

The Gospel of Luke tells us that there was a devout man named Simeon who was led by God’s Spirit to the temple on the same day that Mary and Joseph brought the infant Jesus. When Simeon laid eyes on the babe, he was filled with amazement because he knew that Jesus was the Messiah. To declare the identity of the Christ child, the words of Isaiah sprang to his lips. He called him “a light for revelation to the Gentiles.” (Luke 2:32)

As Jesus matured, he immersed himself in the Jewish Scriptures and he discerned God’s Spirit speaking through Isaiah more than any other voice. On numerous times, Jesus quoted Isaiah and Jesus would come to be known as “the light of the world.” (John 8:7-17). Further, Jesus said that all who followed him were to become “the light of the world.” (Matthew 5:9-19). That is our calling. That is our mission.

Frankly, few of us are looking for a mission. Our lives are already full. And if we are in a place of darkness, we just want God to intervene and fix our problem, to heal our illness, to mend our broken relationship. Then we can pick up where we left off and go on with our lives.

However, God does not want us to simply pick up where we left off. God wants more for us. God wants us to experience how precious life can be. We are called to be “a light to the nations” or “the light of the world” because light breaks into our lives when we become light for others. We experience healing when we reach out to heal. We receive when we give.

One of the most influential theologians of the 20th century was Reinhold Niebuhr. For most of his life he taught ethics at Union Seminary in New York. However, before he became a professor, he served as a pastor for 13 years.

In a sermon, he once told the story of “a farm boy who had always dreamed of going to sea. He dreamed of being a deck hand on one of the tall sailing ships of the 19th century. After years of planning, he slipped away from the farm one night, made his way to the nearest port, and signed on a great sailing ship as a deck-hand. It was just as he had dreamt it would be – until the third day at sea. The captain ordered him up the main mast to assume watch in the crow’s nest. The boy began climbing the towering mast, but halfway up, he froze. He was afraid to risk the rest of the climb up, but he was also afraid of the taunts of the sailors on the deck below if he climbed down.”

Is that where many of us find ourselves? Afraid to take the risk of climbing higher and becoming a light to the world. Tempted to slide back down to a more comfortable, less challenging place.

God calls us to climb higher because God knows that we can become more than we are today. And God sees a world in darkness that is desperate for more light.

What exactly does it mean to be the light of the world? To view life in terms of what I can give rather than what I can get. It means to remember that we are all whizzing through the solar system on this small planet together and so it is imperative to make decisions based on what enhances the common good.
To be a light is to be a healing presence. There are many, so many, who are broken, fearful, lost. Some have had bad breaks, some have made bad choices. We can ignore them or we can be a positive force in their path to healing.

To be a light is to be forgiving. Revenge comes naturally and ratchets up emotions. Forgiveness can prevent people from becoming enemies.

To be a light is to show respect, to strive for justice, to be generous and to counter the despair of our world with a spirit of hope.

Jesus taught us to love one another and to care for people in need. He said that our lives would be rich and we would draw closest to God, not when we get what we think we want, but when we give ourselves to others.

Presbyterian minister, Dean Thompson remembers his son’s high school basketball coach, Art Large, a big, tough individual. How tough? When Art was younger, he was Muhammad Ali’s sparring partner. He had a loud bark and at the beginning of each season, he gave his patented speech to a gym full of scared kids. He said, “Boys, if you don’t play the role I tell you to play on the team, you’re going to be sitting here on this bench beside me, wishing you had played the role I told you to play!”

“But Art Large was also a pussycat with a heart made of putty. Out of his own pocket, he bought more eyeglasses and more shoes for more kids than anyone could count.”

One day following practice, Thompson said to the coach, ‘I can’t get over how Stacey is playing with such confidence. I’ve never seen him so self-assured.’

‘That’s right,’ said the coach.

Thompson asked, ‘What’s the secret?’

And the coach said, “Well, I think the secret is this. Stacey sidled up to me last month and said, ‘Coach, have you ever been to one of those real restaurants?’ I asked him what he meant.

He said, “I’m not talking about McDonalds. I mean, one of those places where they have tablecloths, and silverware, and nice dishes and napkins made out of material. You know what I’m talking about Coach? I’ve never done that. I’d love to go to one of those restaurants some day.’

Art took Stacey to Sears, and bought both of them a new dress shirt and a tie. He took Stacey to a restaurant that had tablecloths and napkins made out of material. And ever since that night, Stacey has played basketball with great confidence.”

When you share God’s love with another, it can have a tremendous impact. When you show people respect, that can prompt them to walk a little taller and to play with great confidence.

Isaiah said that the people of God are to be a light to the nations and Jesus confirmed that to be our mission. To be a light is when you remember that everyone is special in God’s eyes.

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