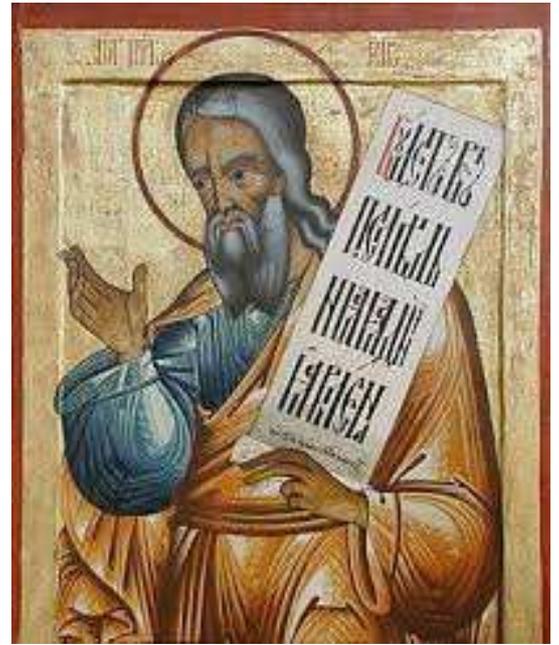


Reflection; January 15, 2023: - Isaiah 49:1-7 By Megan Cambridge

In his autobiography, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr shared a story about what it was like to live under threats of violence at the time of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. In late January of 1956, about a month after the strike began, late one night, after a hard day, Dr. King got one more threatening call at his home. The caller said that they would make him sorry that he every came to Montgomery. Even though he had received hundreds of threats at this point, on that day, as he laid in bed, this call was simply one too many. He couldn't sleep. He said, "It seemed that all of my fears had come down on me at once. I had reached the saturation point." He got up and began to pace through his house. He ended up in his kitchen wondering if he could be the leader he felt he was called to be in



Montgomery. He wondered if his daughter or his wife would be killed by the white supremacists who hated him so. He wondered if he would be killed and taken from them. He wondered if his own fear would shake the nerves of people boycotting the segregated buses. He sat at his kitchen table, wracked with doubt and fear, and unsure if he was up to the task before him. He realized that he needed to pray.

He described what he prayed aloud for in his kitchen that night. "Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now, I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. Now, I am afraid. And I can't let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they, too, will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone."

Dr. King described what happened next as a kind of quiet assurance. He said that it was as though an inner voice told him, "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you. Even until the end of the world." He describes this moment, the moment where he knew clearly that his mission was to stand up for truth, justice, and righteousness, was the moment in his whole life when he most clearly felt the presence of God. His fear and uncertainty faded away. He said that he was ready to face anything that came his way because he knew that God was with him on that journey.

Just like Dr. King was certain that God was directing him towards justice, the prophet Isaiah, in our OT reading, was certain that God would direct the people towards justice and righteousness. Both Dr King's experience and the writing of Isaiah are set in dark, troubled times. In the case of Isaiah's writings this was within the context of devastation of the homeland and survival in exile but it also speaks to and across all time. This portion of Isaiah is the 2nd of 4 'Servant songs'. The Servant songs are found in Isaiah 42:1-4; Isaiah 49:1-6; Isaiah 50:4-11; and Isaiah 52:13-53:12. In the first song we hear God's voice. That song celebrates the patient, non-violent, merciful ministry of the Servant. In this, the second, we hear the Servant's own voice speaking to a remarkable vocation. This song

describes how God will direct the people. A leader, or the whole people of Judah acting as leader among nations, would be called up and sharpened by God to rebuild God's reign on earth. The Servant will be both certain of their calling and fearful that they may not be able to fulfil all that God needs of them. "God said to me, 'You are my Servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.' But I said, '**I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with God.**'" Can you hear that tension between mission and exhaustion, calling and fear?

Just as Dr. King felt God's presence at the kitchen table, in this beautiful, ancient poetry, God brings quiet assurance to the Servant, too. God said that this Servant will be able to help more than simply the tribes of Jacob and the survivors of Israel. God says, "**I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.**" The wicked will be overturned. God will raise and empower a ruler from the ones who have been most despised. God says that yes, this calling is hard but you have been made for this and you do this, not simply for your people, but for your neighbours and their children and grandchildren and for people you will never know and, 'I will be with you. Even unto the end of the earth.'

Part of the beauty of Isaiah is that these 'Servant songs' aren't simply directions to one specific leader or monarch. As Christians we often read these words as prophecy regarding the life and mission of Jesus. In some of the Gospels, Jesus roots his own mission in the words of Isaiah. That being said, I don't think that this song is just to help us understand Jesus. It's to help us understand our own calling, too. Through our faith in Christ, we have been adopted into this ancient Servant nation, a whole people who have been shaped and moulded from creation to serve **as light in God's darkness and as advocates for the oppressed**. We don't have to be Jesus or the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in order to fulfil this mission. We can be the ones supporting organisations who take the fight for justice to world leaders. We can be the ones writing letters/sending emails or making phone calls to our leaders (local or national), making sure that they are caring for the ones who Jesus cared for: the sick, the aged, the isolated. We can be the ones who do stand up for truth and challenge what isn't right in our own contacts, communities and neighbourhoods. We can be the ones who shop at the local shop, supporting our neighbours. We can continue to pray for the needs of God's world and the growth of His Kingdom here on earth and we can make sure that this church is one place in the whole community where everyone knows that they are safe and that they will be greeted as beloved children of God.

If/When we grow weary, because being God's light in the world can be exhausting and frightening, maybe we can remember those words that Dr. King heard at his kitchen table: "Stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you. Even until the end of the world."

Ref: The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr. edited Clayborne Carson