

Epic Scale
Isaiah 49:1-13
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First Central Congregational UCC
15 January 2017

Have you ever been discouraged? Exhausted? Maybe even defeated? Then today's scripture reading is for you! Here the servant of God feels like a failure. "I have labored in vain," the servant complains. How does God respond? Hear now this word from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah 49:1-13

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 God named me.
God made my mouth like a sharp sword,
in the shadow of God's hand I was hidden;
God made me a polished arrow,
in his quiver God hid me away.

And God 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 the Lord's servant,
to bring Jacob back to God,
and that Israel might be gathered to the Lord,
for I am honored in the sight of the Lord,
and my God has become my strength—
God 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 her 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.”

Thus says the Lord:

In a time of favor I have answered you,
on a day of salvation I have helped you;
I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people,
to establish the land,
to apportion the desolate heritages;
saying to the prisoners, “Come out,”
to those who are in darkness, “Show yourselves.”
They shall feed along the ways, on all the bare heights shall be their pasture;
they shall not hunger or thirst,
neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down,
for the One who has pity on them will lead them,
and by springs of water will guide them.
And I will turn all my mountains into a road,
and my highways shall be raised up.
Lo, these shall come from far away,
and lo, these from the north and from the west,
and these from the land of Syene.

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;
break forth, O mountains, into singing!
For the Lord has comforted the people,
and will have compassion on the suffering ones.

For the Word of God in scripture,
For the Word of God among us,
For the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God.

Did you hear God’s answer to the servant who thinks she is a failure? God 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.

The servant was supposed to restore Israel and so far had not succeeded. God doesn’t,
then, take back the call. God expands it. The servant had set her sights too low. She really
ought to save the entire world.

What's going on here? Doesn't sound all that pastoral. Imagine a scenario like this. Someone's new to the church and I ask them to organize a pizza party for the youth. The pizzas all end up burned and half the youth get food poisoning from the salad. The person comes to me feeling like a failure and I tell them I'm nominating them for moderator. Why would God give this servant such anxiety?

Because God knows we are each powerful and glorious. God knows that because God made us. God knows we are capable of amazing things. Even saving the world.

Scholar Stephanie Paulsell writes about this passage in Isaiah, "Surely this is the song God sings to each of us: that all of our work, no matter how local, must have the good of the whole world as its aim."

Whether you are raising your kids, fixing broken pipes, building bridges, curing diseases, teaching adolescents, writing books, defending our country—whatever your vocation, if you are a Christian your true purpose and aim is the good of the entire world.

Reordering the world is not easy. It is, in fact, quite difficult. This week on Facebook I posed the question, "What is something difficult that you have done?" Here are some of the answers you gave:

Calmly discussing a major difference of opinion with a very angry person.

Quit a job before I had a new one.

Try to learn a new language so I can empathize with people moving to a new country
I worked my way through Creighton by working 2 part time jobs and riding the city bus everywhere.

Remained quiet and didn't fight back when an angry student threw me through a door.
Buried our parents & my sister.

Death notifications. At night there was almost always a porch light on for someone who was never coming home. I had to knock on that door and turn someone's world upside down. I didn't have to do it often, but even once is too many times.

Chemo and bone marrow harvest 1986. Doing that again - one year treatment 2012-2013. hardest, happiest thing - climbing Half Dome.

While teaching at UNL, I had to make a choice between standing up for ethics or my department chair. I chose ethics and turned my department chair into affirmative action during a hiring process. Needless to say I didn't stay on much longer at UNL and have never regretted it.

raising a child.....being black while living in America.....maintaining my sanity...

Learn to be kind to myself and forgive myself in the process.

Members of this congregation have done amazing things. You've faced dreaded diseases. You've run for public office, which takes great courage I think. You've served in the military. You've sent sons and daughters and husbands and wives off to war and welcomed them home. You've been middle school teachers, which might be a sign of insanity, but also great tenacity and chutzpah. You've battled addiction. You've passed laws. You've raised kids. And you've also done the difficult work of becoming better people, overcoming your own limitations, temptations, and sins, and in the process of changing yourselves, you also help to change the world.

I believe that God calls us to participate in an epic adventure. We can discover the meaning and the purpose of our lives in the mission of God. We can be part of something much bigger than ourselves.

In the summer of 2015 I was wondering what my next big project was going to be. I had spent much of the previous decade as a local leader here and in Oklahoma in the struggle for LGBT equality and by summer 2015 that great project seemed to have reached its climax. Sure, there was still work to be done, but the most difficult part of the struggle, which is changing people's hearts and minds, we had accomplished. The little old matter of passing all the laws is ultimately less difficult, I believe. I'm proud of the tiny part I played in a global movement for civil rights. Inspired by my religious faith I helped to make the once impossible a reality.

So, time to do it again.

That summer the Rev. Becky McNeil took me to lunch to discuss the experiences that Michael and I had while trying to be foster parents. We've never shared publicly all of our experiences, some of which we can't legally, but you who were around know enough to know that we had a really difficult time. And I'm not talking about our foster son. The real struggle wasn't with him, but with the agencies, the bureaucracies, the deeply broken system. Here we were good, caring people with lots to offer and every time we turned a corner we ran into another roadblock. And it wasn't just because we were a same-sex couple, though there was that. I think the bigger flaw in the system is that it is almost impossible for a professional couple with two careers to be foster parents. There are too many meetings, too much paperwork. The system is inefficient and frankly filled with lots of stupid stuff. Inefficiencies and stupidities drive me nuts. And I'm not one to refrain from expressing my opinion.

But it was more than that even. I reported one agency for what I believed were violations of confidentiality laws. We experienced agencies engaging in territorial bickering that failed to support the welfare of the child. Some people were clearly incompetent. Many, though, were very well intentioned and not receiving the support they needed to do their jobs well.

So I have lots of opinions about the child welfare system. Becky wanted to hear all of that. Though I think she got more of an earful than she had expected.

That night, I couldn't sleep. My brain was racing. I began to write down all of my ideas of how the system ought to be better. I began to research best practices of other states online. The next morning I was exhausted. That day I had lunch with Tracy Zais about another matter, but when we sat down I said, "I think the Holy Spirit is calling me to work on fixing the child welfare system. Can you please convince me otherwise?"

I called Becky McNeil and we had lunch again and we kept having lunch.

One thing I knew is that we could start small. I can list a hundred small fixes that would improve the lives of foster parents. Becky had her own list from her years working in the system. We decided to begin with one that is easy for church folk. We'd fix lunch.

A persistent problem with the child welfare system is that the frontline service providers, the social workers, get burned out. They are often young, idealistic people who leave the profession after only a few short years. Turnover rates are high. Last month UNO received a grant of \$15 million to study the problem. We laughed that no one needed a \$15

million study. Why not spend the \$15 million on increasing pay and benefits and hiring more workers and thus help the problem?

Becky knew that many social workers experience heartbreaking situations but have no venue to receive care, support, and encouragement. But as pastors we could provide that. So in October we launched Lift! a monthly lunch for frontline social workers in which we express our support for the difficult work they do, offer a devotion, and pray for and with them.

These lunches have become highlights of my month as we listen to the social workers share about their work. The trauma of going through a nasty divorce while still helping needy families. The frustrations with constantly changing rules and regulations that often hinder their ability to do their job well. The frightening middle of the night call during Christmas that one of the children they were helping has run away and is being sex trafficked. One social worker this week said, "I walk through spiritual warfare every day."

Besides support, encouragement, and prayer, we are also listening to see if there are any things that we as faith leaders can help with. So, in November one social worker complained about a difficulty they have when working with a family and getting their utilities turned back on. We wrote a letter to one of the utilities and had a phone call with their President this week in an effort to solve the problem. We have two meetings on the matter scheduled this week. We are hopeful.

During this week's lunch one of the social workers said that what she thinks they need most is simply praise for the work they are doing. Becky and I had an epiphany. Care packages for the workers. So for St. Valentine's Day our church and First Christian are going to prepare baskets of goodies—chocolates and healthy snacks and homemade cookies and cards of appreciation. And they asked specifically for packages of good pens, because they are always losing their good pens. The social workers who come to Lift! next month will then carry those baskets back to their offices to share with their co-workers.

You know how easy and relatively cheap it will be to create a care basket. But when we said we were going to do that, the social workers were so happy. Not because of the stuff, but because it will be a chance for some members of the public to say "Thank you," "Good work," "We honor and appreciate you."

So, I'm asking if you would be willing to help with that? Do you individually want to make a basket? Or get together with a couple of families? Or maybe some groups within the church? Anybody really. We hope to make this a monthly project, so maybe you'll take March or June instead of next month. Oh, and anyone want to help me coordinate this?

Stephanie Paulsell again, "Surely this is the song God sings to each of us: that all of our work, no matter how local, must have the good of the whole world as its aim."

God calls each of us to change the world. To live our lives on an epic scale. But we make that change happen by doing our part. The world is saved by actions that seem both big and small. But when the actions that seem small are part of something larger, they aren't small at all. They are in fact epic.

How is God calling you this year? How is your life lived in service to the mission of God?

God has given you to be a light to the nations, so that salvation might reach to the ends of the earth.