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January 18, 2025, 2nd Sunday after the Epiphany
Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

An Antidote to Exhaustion

Isaiah 49:1-7

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.
The Lord made my mouth like a sharp sword;
in the shadow of God's hand I was hidden;
The Lord made me a polished arrow;
in God's quiver I was hidden away.
And the Lord 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 a 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—
the Lord 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, the Holy One of Israel,
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."

In our hymn madness bracket, the tightest race was “Praise to the Lord the Almighty” which lost by a mere three votes to “Crown Him with Many Crowns.” The victor, though, with the greatest margin was “It Is Well with My Soul,” which won a decisive victory over “Rock of Ages.” When we reviewed the results this week, Matt Benkert worried for a moment that it might have been that the overview he wrote for “Rock of Ages” was kind of a downer. Which may be, but...while few of us have faced the kind of tragedy Horatio Spafford faced, the author of “It Is Well with My Soul,” who lost so many members of his family, all of us know the kind of exhaustion and weariness that comes on when it seems that tragedy follows unending tragedy. When we face the “pile on” of bad news on top of bad news. Good Lord, do we get weary.

Yet Spafford’s invitation to trust and hope that “it is well with my soul” speaks to the heart’s longing to be open—wide open—to the peace of God that sustains us in the midst of our weariness, and our call to share that peace with one another. In today’s reading, we see that longing, when “the servant” of Isaiah admits both their weariness and their trust in God, and God responds with an enlarged mission, an invitation to whole-hearted living.

The book of Isaiah records four “servant songs.” Last week we read from the first; this week, we read from the second; the third and fourth come up in Lent. Classically, Christians have felt Isaiah’s words in these songs point to Jesus. The classical Jewish interpretation is that the servant is the Israel—the whole people, the whole nation. But because the servant’s mission is *to* Israel, as we see in verse 5 and again in verse 6, some scholars have wondered if there a specific, historical person Isaiah is speaking about, but no one has really figured out who that might be. It is impossible to know the exact identity of the servant, but we know some important details about them. Most importantly, whoever they are, like the Blues Brothers, they’re on a mission from God.

And that mission is one of healing and liberation. The servant mission is to gather Israel from where they have been scattered. The exile sent the people to the capital city of Babylon, also called Babylon, but they were also sent to other places in the sprawling Empire. Some Jews remained in the ruined city of Jerusalem and other bigger cities, towns, and villages, and some, in rural and remote areas, remained untouched by the violence, but also cut off from one another as a result. The servant is called to gather all these people together, to reunite them as a people again, to bring them home.

It is a hopeful mission, but, at this point, the exile is going on fifty years. History tells us that it is nearly over, that Cyrus the great of Persia is rising, and he will conquer Babylon, and send the exiles home. But from this place in the story, no one know that. And the servant’s exhaustion and discouragement is on display midway through this passage. The servant says, “But I have labored in vain. I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.” The servant has been called to gather the scattered people of Israel and bring them home. But the exile has already been a lifetime. Children, grandchildren, even great-grandchildren have been born far from home. Grandparents have been buried in this foreign soil. Loss has piled on to of loss.

And it hasn't been easy, "normal"—some kind of day-to-day safety has never really arrived. Esther and Daniel recount stories of foiled genocides and near-murders of Jews who dare to worship God or challenge the Empire's authority. The people are weary. The servant is worn out.

Fifty years is just a blip in human history, yet it doesn't take much to imagine what the days looked like, on the ground, from the street view of the exiles, or those picking through the rubble of Jerusalem, or the ones spared, but scared in some remote rural Judean village. It doesn't take much to imagine the flickers of hope that rarely shimmer in between the days of discouragement, the weariness that settles into your bones as a week becomes a month becomes a year, a decade, a lifetime. It doesn't take much to imagine how you try to go on, to find something that looks like normalcy, even as your ears are always tuned for some word of change, even as your heart always knows the direction to turn toward home.

Which is, ultimately, what the servant admits, that even when it might make more sense to give up, to be all, "this is my life now," even *then*, the servant says, "my cause...my reward [are] with my God." I think this, really is a prayer. Maybe I think it is a prayer, because it sounds so much like what I've been praying as of late. I pray about how I write letters and make phone calls and send money and try to just put so much good out into the world, and still I am weary, so weary. I pray about how every day it seems that there is just more to feel hopeless about, and more to feel discouraged by. And yet, like the Psalmist, like Isaiah, I wait for the Lord. I pray that my cause is with the Lord.

And I think the servant is praying because God answers. And God says, this thing you've been doing, to gather and restore my people, this isn't all I'm calling you to do. No, I want you to bring the message of that light and salvation to everyone—all the nations. Walter Brueggemann says we should consider light and salvation as synonyms, "both of them referring to the full offer of well-being as intended by the creator." He says, "'Light' is the antithesis of darkness, disorder, and chaos; and 'salvation' is the count to oppression, exploitation, and despair."

But what strikes me most from God's response is that God seems to think this expanded mission is, somehow, the answer to the servant's weariness. Sometimes I imagine holding a microphone when I pray, and giving it a little tap: is this thing on? This happens less often when I feel my prayers have gone unanswered, and more often when I feel that growing sense of call, leading me in directions I'd prefer not to go. Ahem, God? I *said*, I'm tired. I'm spent. And most of the time God very happily says, "Yep; I heard you. Let's get going," which is very annoying. I mean, sometimes God blessedly says, "Let's have a snack and a nap." But then, "Let's get going."

And yet...The poet David Whyte wrote a book about work, a philosophical memoir justifying his decision to be a poet, to give up a more traditional career and to make his

work poetry. One evening, weary, he welcomes a friend, a monk, also named David. And the poet asks the monk, "Tell me about exhaustion." And, as an explanation, the monk says, "You know that the antidote to exhaustion is not necessarily rest?" The poet, so worn out, repeats what has been said, without gaining any understanding: "What is it, then?" The monk says, "The antidote to exhaustion is *wholeheartedness*."

God says, "It is too light a thing for you to be called to worry about these things, you're called to witness to them, to be a part of the work that I am doing, to be a light to the nations, to the whole world." Oh, and isn't there some crumb of truth there?

Beloved, the news comes in fast and hot every day, and heartbreak with it. And it does weary us, when bad news piles upon bad news. Each of us is pulled in a thousand different directions every day as we live out our callings: parent, child, employee, friend, community member, voter, advocate, neighbor. Yet we *are* called, called forward, called to be present, called to do and to be *with our whole hearts*, wide open, shining God's light into the world. Amen.