

2 Epiphany Yr A, 16/01/2011

Isa 49:1-7

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“A light to the nations”

Light. We all need light. Here in the northern hemisphere during the month of January, the days are still short and the nights long. Some folks suffer from SAD—Seasonal Affective Disorder because of the short days. You need light. I need light. Everyone needs light. So, in the church year we are now in the season of Epiphany—the season of light. For us, Christ is the light of the world—and, even in the darkest of winter nights; Christ is still our light, shining in the darkness.

Although the ancient citizens of Judah may not have suffered from SAD, like some folks in our part of the world—nonetheless, they, like some SAD sufferers, were likely discouraged and even depressed living in Babylonian exile. God had chosen them and had made a covenant with them; and that covenant had included a homeland, with a holy city and temple. Now all seemed to have been lost. Where was God now? Would the LORD allow the people of Judah to remain in Babylonian exile forever? Would they ever see their Promised Land again? Had God ended his covenant with his chosen people? Such questions likely tormented many of God's chosen people.

Suddenly, out of the blue as it were, God spoke. And the words, each time I read this second Servant Song in Isaiah, always seem to tickle my funny bone—since I find the irony humorous. God speaks to the Servant—and we are not certain whether the Servant is an individual or God's chosen people collectively. The LORD speaks with what seems to be a bit of a play on the word “light,” saying: “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.”

In the first use of the word light, the meaning seems to refer to that which is not heavy or weighty or that which is easy. The work of raising up the tribes of Jacob to restore the survivors was too light; not too heavy or weighty a task; too easy a task for the servant. I think this is ironic, since to unite all of the Israelite tribes and restore the survivors of the exile; I do not think would be an easy job. The tribes had their differences and those differences could polarize rather than unite them. I would hazard to guess that such a mission of raising up the tribes of Jacob and restoring the survivors of Israel would, in and of itself, be a full-time job and then some—requiring, among other things, a lot of faith, political finesse and patience to say the least! The Servant would need God’s grace to pull off such a mission.

In the second use of the word light, God tells the Servant: “I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” Over the years, I have asked devout Jews how they interpret that phrase “a light to the nations.” I have gotten at least three answers. The light here refers to the Jewish people faithfully keeping Torah. In so doing they honour the covenant that God has made with them, which is an everlasting covenant, and in honouring the covenant by faithfully keeping Torah, the Jews are a light to the nations. Another answer given is that light refers to all of the contributions that the Jewish people have made towards the well-being of the whole civilization. Jews have been highly gifted and excelled in, for example, fields such as art, music and literature. Society as a whole—both Jews and Gentiles—benefit from such gifts. Yet another answer I have received recently from Rabbi Dr. Raymond Apple—whose website *Oz Torah* is worth a visit and most informative!—is that, above all, it is moral/ethical light that is referred to here. Perhaps Rabbi Dr. Apple’s answer is not really different from

the first one—in that faithfully keeping Torah certainly involves morality and ethics; moreover, I would say it is a spiritual endeavour too.

Although the following comments by Rabbi Sadie Reuben are not in reference to our Isaiah passage; however, I do think they are pertinent to what it means to be a light to the nations: Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin offered his interpretation that within every Jew is a ray of light, a ray of light that is brightened by God’s presence. This spiritual light lives within a person and not within one’s dwelling. Therefore, although one’s environment may conceal the physical light within, if a person retains faith in God, the spiritual light will not be extinguished. Furthermore, our rabbis teach that our internal light is brightened by the mitzvot (commandments) that we perform, the acts of kindness that we do. By acting justly and participating in tikkun olam, repairing the world, we have the opportunity to share our personal light with all of humanity. In other words, as Jews, we have a duty to do all we can, whether by donations or by other actions, to help relieve the suffering in places such as Haiti or Darfur. This is a reminder that we count, and that we can bring light to a dark place.¹

As Christians, we too have a parallel here with our Jewish neighbours. Whenever we baptize a person, one of the traditions we value is the lighting of the baptismal candle from the paschal candle and then giving the baptismal candle to either the newly baptized person if they are old enough to hold it or to one of the godparents. Along with the giving of the lit baptismal candle, a representative of the congregation or the officiating pastor speaks the following words of exhortation: “Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” These words of exhortation are actually from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:16, and in two verses earlier, Jesus says: “You are the light of the world.”

So, as Christians, keeping our baptismal covenant involves being a light in the world by deeds of loving kindness. In the history of both Jews and Christians, I think that our calling to be a light to the nations has been a challenge. Whenever we fall on hard times, both faith traditions have the tendency to “circle the wagons,” and focus on ourselves. We can become too ingrown—navel-gazing obsessively and forgetting our larger calling of being a light in the world. When the Servant was perhaps only thinking of his own exiled people; the LORD calls and commissions him to go out and be a light to the nations. When we baptized Christians think only of ourselves, or our congregation; the LORD of the Church would have us remember the words of exhortation, to let our light shine in the world. Our sinful tendency is to try and keep God’s loving grace to ourselves, our family, and our church. However, our God is much larger than that. We cannot dictate to God or place limits on God’s loving grace. God’s deepest desire is to reach out far and wide: “that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

If we look at our world today; we shall certainly see that our prayers as well as our deeds of loving kindness and the preaching of God’s Word are needed in places like Sudan and Burma; Haiti and Iraq, and many more—including among the homeless, unemployed, sick, and imprisoned, and other forgotten souls here in Canada. The need for Christ the light to the nations is as large now as it was at any other time in history. My hope and prayer is that each one of us can remember that we as baptized Christians are called and commissioned to let our light shine in the world; bringing Christ’s love and grace to the least, the lost and the last in our community and around the world.

So, whenever you or your congregation are tempted to “circle the wagons” and narrow or limit God’s love and grace to a select minority; remember that Christ is the light to the nations; remember too that as

recipients of his light our call and commission is to reflect something of that radiant, life-transforming light both in our community and around the world. Amen.

1 Cited from: Rabbi Sadie Reuben, "The Plague of Darkness Light the way Bo, Exodus 10:1-13:16 at the *30 Minute Seder* blog: <<http://30minut seder.com/Passover.blog/ask-rabbi-reuben/the-plague-of-darkness/>>.