

Daily Reflections



Center for Spiritual Development

THE BRIDGE BETWEEN THE WORLDS

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A Reading from the Prophet Isaiah

The LORD called me from birth, from my mother's womb he gave me my name. He made of me a sharp-edged sword and concealed me in the shadow of his arm. He made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me. You are my servant, he said to me, Israel, through whom I show my glory. Though I thought I had toiled in vain, and for nothing, uselessly, spent my strength, yet my reward is with the LORD, my recompense is with my God. For now the LORD has spoken who formed me as his servant from the womb, that Jacob may be brought back to him and Israel gathered to him; and I am made glorious in the sight of the LORD, and my God is now my strength! It is too little, he says, for you to be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and restore the survivors of Israel; I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

ISAIAH 49:1-6

Reflection

The Book of Isaiah is a unique collection of elements in the history of Jerusalem, Judah, and the capital of the united kingdom of Israel. The prophet lived in the mid-8th century BCE, but the text covers prominent events and figures, from the successive wars with the Assyrians through the Babylonian exile in the mid-6th century. As a result, it is not possible to extract a singular message from the text. It chronicles the relationship between the prophet and the kings of Judah as the Assyrians gradually eroded the kingdom—first Israel, and finally Judah. Scholars have generally accepted that the document was composed by three authors (or schools): First Isaiah (1-39), Second Isaiah (40-55), and Third Isaiah (56- 66). In addition to the chronicles of warfare and exile, there is a series of scathing judgments of the infidelity and vanity of the people who had turned away from the path of the God who had freed them and established their national identity. More importantly for future scriptural reflection, Isaiah also puts forth a number of the most rhapsodic and tender professions of fidelity, compassion, and love on the part of God for the people of his heart. In Second Isaiah we read: **“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem” (40: 1); “I am the Lord your God who takes hold of your right hand...Do not fear, I will help you” (41: 13); “Fear not, I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name, and you are mine” (43: 1); “I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you” (46: 4).**

In chapter 49, Isaiah is called to be a prophetic messenger to the world, not simply to the scattered communities of the Jews dispersed among the great kingdoms. A different translation makes God’s intention so much clearer: **“ I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”** The divine imperative is not simply a continuation of the covenant begun in Egypt and during the decades of the exile. It is a salvific vision that embraces all the diverse and divided peoples of the earth, who are yet to receive and rejoice in the simple grandeur of God’s love for all the created order.

This reading is profoundly significant for the feast of John the Baptist, which we celebrated yesterday. As one who straddled the divide between the traditions of the prophets and the rabbis, and the emerging Jewish faith in the broad reaches of the Roman Empire, John recognizes the need for a devoted and penitential community. At the same time, he embraces the mystical vision of God’s love and the radically new horizon of faith that Jesus incarnates among the people. He cannot fathom the extraordinary dimensions of this new reality, but his prophetic spirit bends to the urging of that great Spirit who

inhabits the words and actions of the coming Messiah whom he is to baptize and commission for ministry.

In our contemporary communities of faith, we confront the same perplexing mysteries at work. We acknowledge the importance of our traditions and practices that have shaped the spiritual environment in which we grow and mature in wisdom. At the same time, we hear the clarion call of that greater spiritual movement which invites and inspires us to attend to the ever-emerging realities of the God among and within us, inviting us to discover possibilities of the heart we had never noticed before. Isaiah, in its complex tapestry of history, prophecy, and divine promise, is a foretaste of our own mystical horizon that can illuminate the path behind us, and highlight a boundless new future.



John the Baptist baptizes Jesus

For Pondering

- What are the aspects of your faith tradition that ground your current sense of religious identity in everyday life?
- How has your spiritual perspective grown in your 'real-life' walk with God?
- Are there ways you feel like John the Baptist—bridging the gap between what you have learned from tradition, and how your sense of the 'living

God' is leading you toward something surprisingly new?

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