

1st Sunday after Epiphany

January 11, 2009

Text: Isaiah 49:1-6

Who is Jesus?

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- I. Jesus is God's Chosen Servant
- II. Jesus is God's Glory
- III. Jesus is God's Salvation

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

This past Tuesday was Epiphany. Including today there are now 6 Sundays in the Epiphany season of the church year. In my experience, this season is frequently not understood. What is epiphany all about? Epiphany is really an extension of the Christmas season. At Christmas we celebrate the birth of Christ. But in Epiphany we see who this baby born in Bethlehem really is. Truth is, we can celebrate Jesus' birthday all we want, but what saves us is knowing and believing who Jesus is and what he accomplished for us.

Who Jesus is is a topic that brings lots of discussion and disagreement. But in our sermon text for today we see that the answer is found in a text which was written by one of God's prophets over 600 years before Jesus was ever born! Let's read our text from Isaiah 49:1-6. Remember that Jesus himself is speaking through the prophet Isaiah.

1 Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: Before I was born the LORD called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name. 2 He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, **in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver.** 3 He said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor." 4 But I said, "I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing. Yet what is due me is in the LORD's hand, and my reward is with my God." 5 And now the LORD says— he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength— 6 he says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

The text we just read starts with a call to listen. What is going to be said is very important. Although Isaiah was an Israelite, and a prophet to the Israelites, note who is supposed to listen to these words. "Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations." The word "islands" is actually better translated "coastal lands". An Israelite who heard that term would know immediately that the "coastal lands" referred to the heathen nations that lived along the coast of the Mediterranean. "Distant peoples" also was a reference to those who did not live in Israel. In other words, all gentiles (non-Israelites) are being called upon to hear this important message! Although prophets usually spoke to God's people, this message is for everyone. This message is for you and me.

I. Jesus is God's chosen Servant

So *who is Jesus?* Some claim that Jesus was a gifted teacher who invented an appealing message. They say that Jesus' message, mission and ministry changed and evolved throughout his life. But listen again to what we just read: 'Before I was born the LORD called me; from my birth he

has made mention of my name." It is clear, ***Jesus is God's chosen servant.*** 600 years before Jesus was ever born, he spoke through the prophet Isaiah. He said, "My life and work have always been a part of God's plan, even before I was born." God's plan of salvation was thought up in eternity, first promised to Adam and Eve after the fall, preserved through the ages, and brought to fulfillment when Jesus was born, lived, died and rose. Jesus was God's chosen one to bring salvation. He was chosen from all eternity.

Our text continues and further explains. "He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver." During World War II, the United States worked secretly to develop the atomic bomb. Even their first and only test in New Mexico was kept secret. When the bombs were dropped in Japan, they were taken completely by surprise. The war was over a few days later.

God also had a secret weapon. He made the promise to save sinful man, but that salvation didn't come for thousands of years. The promise was given and carried forward by a small, usually weak and oppressed nation in the Middle East. From these people would come God's death blow to Satan? This was God's hidden secret weapon!

God makes it clear to us that Jesus was also ***God's chosen instrument.*** Our text compares God's servant Jesus to a sharp sword and a polished arrow. A sword isn't effective unless someone wields it. An arrow is useless unless someone shoots it. But it also says, that the sword was concealed. The arrow was hidden in a quiver. Jesus was God's instrument for salvation, and he was brought forth at just the right time. Galatians 4:4 reminds us of that: "*But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.*" God in his infinite wisdom knew just the right time to bring out his secret weapon. He brought Jesus into this world at just the right time to complete his work of salvation.

In comparing his mouth to a sword, we see that his words would be penetrating and powerful. Jesus was God's Word made flesh! The evangelist John tells us [1:14], *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.*" And so just as Jesus was God's chosen instrument, we also see ***he was God's chosen prophet.***

Jesus words "cut" both ways. In the book of Hebrews we also see God's Word compared to a sword. There we read [4:12], "*For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*" God's prophet Jesus would have words that cut to the heart. On the one hand, he had words that condemned people for their sins. Jesus once said [Jn 12:48], "*There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day.*" Anyone who rejects God's chosen one and the word that he speaks will be condemned!

But Jesus also spoke words of salvation. That sharp sword could also heal! In the familiar passage, John 3:16, Jesus said, "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*" So we see God's chosen

servant was one who spoke God's Word. He spoke God's law to condemn the self-righteous, and he spoke the Gospel to comfort the repentant.

So, who is Jesus? He is **God's chosen Servant**. A prophet who would proclaim God's Word and God's will. He is God's instrument of salvation, concealed for thousands of years, but revealed at just the right time to accomplish our salvation.

II. Jesus is God's Glory

Our text continues by showing us that God's Servant Jesus was also *God's glory*. Certainly, at times it seemed Jesus' life and ministry were a complete failure. Speaking through Isaiah, Jesus says, "I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing." Think about Jesus' "failures". His own people rejected him and hated him. His disciples often didn't understand what he was saying, and sometimes didn't even believe in him. He was betrayed by one of his own disciples, and disowned by the rest. He was beaten and crucified. One might conclude that Jesus "labored to no purpose" and that he "spent his strength in vain and for nothing". Nevertheless, Jesus confidently concludes, "Yet what is due me is in the LORD's hand, and my reward is with my God."

Although Jesus looked like a failure, Jesus trusted he was doing God's will. Since he was fulfilling God's will, God would reward him accordingly, even if it seemed he wasn't accomplishing anything worthwhile. Jesus brought glory to God by accomplishing the mission God set for his chosen Servant.

God said to Jesus: "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor." We read many times how God was glorified in Jesus. Remember the first miracle Jesus did? He turned water into wine at a wedding in Cana. In writing about that miracle, John notes, *'He [Jesus] thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.'* In that first miracle and in all of Jesus' miracles, God displayed his glory in Jesus. Jesus' whole purpose was to bring glory to God. When the time came near for Jesus to suffer, Jesus said to his disciples [John 12:27-28], *"Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!" Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again."* So who is Jesus? Jesus is God's glory. Through his perfect life, and even in his suffering and death, he rescued us and gave us life. As a result we praise and glorify God through the Lord Jesus Christ. How did Jesus specifically glorify the Father? – by accomplishing salvation for all mankind.

III. Jesus is God's salvation.

Carrying out God's salvation involved two things. Our text says, *"He... formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself."* The first part of God's plan for Jesus was that he restore the people of Israel to himself. Originally, God gave the promise of salvation to all people. But man was so evil, the promise was almost lost forever. God called Abraham to be the Father of a great nation... a nation that would remember God's promise of a Savior... a nation that would give birth to the Savior. But even this special, chosen nation rejected God's love and kindness. They turned to other gods and mostly forgot God's gracious promise of a Savior. But God's plan was that Jesus would restore Israel. Jesus would remind them of God's promises and would himself fulfill all of God's promises. Jesus would bring salvation to God's chosen nation of Israel!

But this was only part of Jesus' plan. This was a great task, but God figured that his Servant Jesus could do much more. God said of Jesus, "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth." Here we see already in the Old Testament that Jesus wasn't just to be the Savior of God's chosen nation. God's plan was for Jesus to bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

When old Simeon held baby Jesus in his arms at the temple [Luke 2:25-35], he remembered God's plans for the Messiah. He remembered Isaiah's prophecy. With the confidence of faith he said, "*My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.* [30-32]" Who is Jesus? He is God's salvation... salvation for both Jews and Gentiles. He is salvation for all people.

Yes, Jesus has been misunderstood by most people throughout history. But through the words of Isaiah, written long before Jesus was ever born, we know who Jesus is! Perhaps we best appreciate who Jesus is when we understand what our spiritual needs are.

- Every day we commit sins which separate us from God. We fail to serve our Lord. We want to be lord of our own lives. We deserve death. But God, before we were ever born, decided to send Jesus – the perfect Servant. He faced rejection, ridicule, suffering and death for us. He gives us life and salvation.
- We close our ears to God. When we sin, we try to hide... we try to run away from God. We don't want to hear God's voice. Nevertheless, God sent Jesus to share with us God's Word. He sent Jesus to call us to repentance. He sent Jesus to share good news with us. He spoke to us, even when we didn't want to speak to him.
- By our disobedience, we ruin God's reputation, and damage his good name. But God sent Jesus to bring him glory and honor. Jesus accomplished God's plan of salvation, and for that God continues to receive glory to this day. That same Jesus cleanses us from all sin, and enables us to glorify God too.
- And how do we know that all of this really is true of Jesus? We know this because he rose from the dead proving that all that he said and all that he did is true.

What does all this mean for us? Who is Jesus to me? Jesus is life. Jesus is joy. Jesus is peace. Jesus is forgiveness. Jesus is love. Jesus is my salvation. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. Always remember who Jesus is, and you will praise God with Isaiah [49:13]: "*Shout for joy, O heavens; rejoice, O earth; burst into song, O mountains! For the Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.*" Amen.

And the peace of God which transcends all human understanding will guard and keep your hearts and your minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.