

## **A Light to the Nations**

Isaiah 49:1-7

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When we speak of saints in the church, one of the first people that always comes to my mind is Lonnie Kliever. Dr. Kliever was one of my first religion professors in undergrad, perhaps the one that made me a religious studies major. He was not a large man: a battle with rickets as a child stunted his growth, so he was under 5 feet tall and had numerous joint problems that made him walk with canes or a walker – or at times ride in a wheelchair. He was approaching 70 when I met him, but I never would have guessed. His energy led me to believe he was 20 years younger, and his smile and sharp mind never betrayed his health problems: he had kidney disease, and was on the list for a transplant for years, but before he could get one, was diagnosed with prostate cancer, so he was deemed ineligible for a transplant. This didn't slow him down, though: he simply taught classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays, then graded papers while receiving dialysis on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. This multi-tasking, among other things, made his handwriting almost impossible to read – I took it on as a personal challenge to interpret his written comments for my classmates.

Dr. Kliever would not have appreciated being labeled as a saint, and on our first meeting, I would not have offered him that designation. You see, when I first met him, as a young co-ed new to the big city and the university, straight from my tiny private school in rural West Georgia and my small conservative United Methodist Church, I thought Dr. Kliever was a heretic at best. He had all kinds of ideas about God that I had never heard, and he suggested we students read things that I did not appreciate. The first class I took with him was called “Problems in the Philosophy of Religion.” The first paper I wrote for him was a response to an essay we were to read in our primary textbook. I do not remember what the essay was about, but I remember thinking it was ludicrous, and I wrote a passionate response, full of proof-texting and accusations of blasphemy. After all, I clearly knew God better than the person who had been published in my textbook. I got a C on the essay, and once I interpreted the comments, I learned this was only because my terribly angry and poorly-formed argument was well-written; otherwise I should have failed.

I went to Dr. Kliever's office to discuss this grade, this essay. And his response to me, the self-righteous undergrad, was incredibly patient and pastoral: he smiled his sparkly smile and said something like, “Even if you disagree with the author, you have to at least engage with the reading.” Without so many words, he encouraged me to imagine God a little bit bigger than I had previously allowed. It was in Dr. Kliever's classes that I began to understand that all the cultures of the world have tended to make God in their own image: the oppressed see God as liberator, the intellectuals see wise sage, the rich a cosmic vending machine... we all have our own ideas of who God is. I had my own idea. But all of these are limited. And they're all too small.

In our Old Testament text today, the prophet Isaiah speaks to this concept. In Chapter 49, the servant yells out to all the nations: “Listen, you distant people!” I love that... Maybe I'll start beginning my sermons that way: “Listen up, back row!” Maybe not... but he goes on to say that God has done a most surprising thing. You see, Israel has been under siege. Jerusalem has fallen because they have been disobedient to God again and again and again. And while the author of this text confirms what so many others have said, that God called him before he was born and prepared him to be a servant, it seems unlikely that God would still want to use him after all that

has happened. He's been given a pretty huge job – to restore Israel, to gather back in those who have been far off, to reunite the church; and he says that he's labored in vain. He has failed.

We expect that God might say, "Okay, look, I'll give you another chance – here's something you might actually be able to do. Just try to gather a *few* people. Restore *part* of Israel. If you can prove yourself with that, then I'll maybe give you a bigger job to try. You can work your way back up to your initial calling. I see that I asked too much of you to start out." Instead, God comes back and says, "Restore Israel? That's too small a job. I have planned for more: I want you to be a light to the nations, to spread my salvation to the ends of the earth. I am going to use you for something far larger than you could have imagined. Every nation, every person, every life will be your business as I work through you." The servant has failed, but he gets an even bigger job – something he never could have imagined: to be a light to the ends of the earth.

God is bigger than we think, and God has more in store than we could have imagined: God has a greater destiny for us than we might have thought.

Now, it's easy to read this text with skepticism. "A light to the nations? Yah right. The nations are always changing and half of them don't *want* my light, and there's plenty to do around here anyway." Or maybe we think, "I'll just start here in my neighborhood, something I can possibly handle and we'll work up from there." Or maybe we're skeptical that God is working in us at all in light of all that's been happening.

I went to lunch on Wednesday with a colleague in ministry who expressed that she is exhausted from trying to defend God and the church these days. I knew just what she meant: with so much wrong in the world, with so many problems, I feel tempted to just hole up at home and pray the Psalm we prayed together: "How long, O God? How long? Come quickly!" We ask all those questions about how God could let such things happen – some Christians think we're being punished for a multitude of sins. Others are convinced God has left the earth to spin on its own and is just sitting back taking it all in. Everyone is looking for someone to blame.

As pastors, we want to go on vacation and come back when it's all over – as if it's going to be all over in our lifetime—because it feels like we're supposed to have the answers, and we don't. We can't say why these bad things have happened. We can't explain what made someone shoot his congresswoman and a lot of other innocent people. We can't tell you why there are floods in Australia and why the government is falling apart in Tunisia and why Haiti can't recover from the earthquake that ravaged it a year ago and why we're worried about Iran and Korea and nuclear weapons and why we're still in Iraq and Afghanistan so many years later. Or why someone you know has cancer. Or why someone gets beat at home. We don't have the answers. We pastors can't fix it all.

But I realize, in reading this text from Isaiah, that God doesn't need my defense and God isn't asking me to answer these age-old questions with 30-second sound bites for the evening news. What Isaiah is telling me here – what I think Isaiah is telling *all* of us – is that God is bigger than we think. It might not always make sense, but God's plans are beyond our comprehension, even when it looks like everything has gone wrong. God's intentions are greater than we can understand. God's thinking is eons ahead of ours. And God's call on our lives is more far-reaching than we had ever hoped for.

Israel was God's chosen people, too. And everything fell apart for them. Everything. And God's response wasn't, "take the first step toward putting things back together," or "I'm sorry you're having a hard time right now – why don't you take a little break." God's response was, "You're thinking too small. And I have bigger plans for you." We're called to be a light to the

nations, to let God use us to spread salvation to the ends of the earth, to be agents of justice and reconciliation and peace in a world that thrives on fear and power and selfishness.

And as we approach Martin Luther King day, I can't help but connect that great prophet's words with this one's. Because if there's anything we learned from Dr. King, I think it's that we have to think bigger than what seems possible: we have to allow ourselves to dream. And then work to make that dream come true, no matter how unfeasible or impractical or crazy it sounds to the people around us. Because God is bigger than we think, and our call is greater than we can imagine, no matter how much we've messed up in the past or how bad things seem now.

I ended up taking all of Dr. Kliever's classes that I could, and they were my very favorite courses as an undergrad. I wish I had told him what a saint he was to me, as he died from complications of kidney disease in 2004, just a few months after his retirement from teaching. He didn't let the limitations of his life or experience limit the way he saw God – or the way he served God. He was a light to the nations and a light to me. Like Dr. King, he dreamed big, impossible dreams, even when others said he was crazy. I pray all of us will follow suit. We're called to be a light to the nations, to dream bigger – even impossible – dreams, and to work to make those dreams come true.

Amen.