

### **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 he named me. He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. And he 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 his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the Lord, and my God has become my strength— he 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 and his Holy One, 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."

**Chosen** - January 19, 2020  
*Isaiah 49:1-7*

One of the rituals of childhood I most despised was lining up during gym class to be chosen to play on a team. Everyone knew that I was a terrible athlete: slow, ignorant of playing techniques, and unable to hit the ball in whatever sport. Needless to say, I was always among the last chosen.

And I knew it and after a while, I came to expect it. To this day, I've convinced myself that I am horrible at team sports and that I would be a terrible player. I don't bother with team sports at all. I get my exercise from solo activities like swimming laps or walking fast on the treadmill. In these activities, I am competing against only myself. I don't have to worry about how anybody else is doing. I can go as fast or slow as I want and there's nobody to laugh at me.

Perhaps you can identify with my lack of athletic ability. As adults, we have a better understanding of being chosen or not — or do we? Being chosen or not chosen can be a traumatic experience in life.

Though few of us participate in team sports nowadays, we still periodically have to face times when we will be chosen or rejected. I'm sure we've all applied for jobs for which we were not chosen, despite feeling we were the most qualified. I'm sure we've been passed over for promotions while inferior candidates got the corner office. We've all experienced both acceptance and rejection in the game of love: finding someone, dating them, marrying, and perhaps breaking up with them in some way. For a while, we may have felt like we were chosen by someone with whom we could form a lasting relationship, then for whatever reason, it's all over.

In short, the experience of being chosen as well as the experience of being rejected is part of life and living. No one can avoid them completely. Recall that Jesus himself was chosen by God as we learned last week during his baptism. Recall also that Jesus died rejected and alone, abandoned by nearly everyone.

In today's scripture, God declares that the nation of Israel has been chosen for a special mission. Israel was chosen by God to be a "light to the nations, that [God's] salvation may reach to the end of the earth." Wow! What an honor. Israel was chosen by God for a very special task, a very wonderful mission. Israel was destined to be a light to the nations! Fantastic!

Yes, yes, yes, all well and good. However, there's just something wrong with this picture. When the prophet Isaiah wrote these words nearly 2500 years ago, Israel was hardly in the position to be the light to the world. In fact, Israel barely even existed. Realistically speaking, Israel was virtually

dead. How could the prophet of God speak of Israel being chosen when Israel was barely alive. Impossible.

Let's review the story of Israel, the super-condensed version. Some 4000 years ago, God chose a man named Abram who lived in what is now Iraq. God told Abram to uproot his family and move some 2000 miles west to what we now call Israel. Eventually, famine forced Abraham's descendants to move to Egypt, where they unfortunately became slaves and stayed for 400 years. God ultimately chose a man named Moses to lead the descendants of Abraham, who now called themselves Israelites, out of Egypt to a Promised Land to the north, which they would call Israel.

Along the way, Moses and the people escaped Egypt by crossing the Red Sea and Moses climbed Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments from God.

Forty years after leaving Egypt, the Israelites arrived at the banks of the Jordan River and crossed into the Promised Land. They had to fight to claim the land, but they finally succeeded in securing a territory somewhat larger than today's nation of Israel.

To lead Israel, God chose men and women called Judges who tried their best to offer wisdom and guidance. God also chose prophets to reveal the will of God. However, about 3000 years ago, the people decided they wanted to have a king, just like all the other countries. God's prophets strongly objected to this decision and painted a very gloomy picture of what would happen once the nation was ruled by kings — a picture that proved to be true. However, like many a parent who supports the sometimes crazy decisions of their children, God chose the first three kings of Israel: Saul, David, and Solomon. Under these three, Israel prospered and became wealthy because it straddled the major trade routes between Europe, Africa, and Asia.

God continued to choose prophets to speak to the people after Solomon died. The prophets worked to warn Israel repeatedly that they were being unfaithful to God and at some point, God would punish them for their disobedience. Moreover, the ruling class of Israel made themselves richer and richer at the expense of the regular people.

So, about 2500 years ago, the empire of Babylon, which we now call Iran, invaded and defeated Israel. Israel had become so corrupt that the people didn't even bother to fight the invading Babylonians and, in many cases, just surrendered. The common people figured life couldn't be any worse under the Babylonians than it was under their own leaders. Many took the opportunity to flee Israel altogether and start a new life in a faraway nation.

To make their victory complete, the Babylonians kidnapped the ruling class, and dragged them into exile in the city of Babylon, essentially destroying the nation of Israel by tearing it into pieces. Only a few of the faithful remained. Almost no one was left in Israel who knew God or would worship God. Israel, for all practical purposes, was dead. However, the people who fled, as scattered and as weak they were, did not forget.

But this development is bizarre. How could Israel be virtually dead? How could people find themselves scattered, literally, around the world? Gone, all gone. This is bizarre because the entire point of Israel was that they were designated by God to be God's chosen people. Israel was supposed to be an example of what it was like to live according to God's laws and follow God's guidance and wisdom. Israel was the key to God's plan to bring humanity back from the mess it created for itself and prove that there was a better way of living and being on this earth. When you take the time to look at the ten commandments and think about all they mean and the implications they have for our daily existence, you realize they all make sense. Why shouldn't we place God first in our lives? Why shouldn't we honor our parents, when possible? Why shouldn't we rest, really rest, once a week? Why shouldn't we stop lying, cheating, stealing, killing, and being jealous of each other? Can anyone possibly object to any of this? Take it a step further. What if a whole society built itself around these ideas, these commandments? What if everyone tried their best to live this way? What kind of society would it be? The answer is the society would be Israel.

And that is where today's scripture comes in.

Here is the prophet Isaiah, chosen by God, to preach a new message to Israel. Now bear in mind that there was hardly anyone around to hear what Isaiah had to say. Israel had been torn apart and its leaders taken into captivity. Moreover, Isaiah was preaching and prophesying to a handful of people who weren't even living in Israel, but hundreds of miles away in Babylon.

Can you imagine a more ridiculous situation? I mean here we have a small group of people, the remnant of what was once a very wealthy and powerful nation. These people, for whatever reason, despite all the bad things that had happened to them, despite losing their land, despite losing many of their friends and families — a very, very small group of people kept their faith in God and paid attention to what Isaiah had to say.

And what Isaiah had to say was absolutely insane.

What Isaiah said to this pitiful, defeated, dispirited remnant was to tell them that in God's view, they still were the chosen people. God still knew them. God still loved them. And most importantly, God still had a mission for them. But this time, the mission was focussed not only on themselves, but on

the entire world! Isaiah told them that God would “give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” What!? How!? When the people heard this, they must have looked around and wondered, what is this guy talking about? How could God do anything with us? We are nothing! Yes, once upon a time we were great, but now we are nothing!

Yet, friends, the most bizarre thing of all is that God’s plan worked. Israel, poor little, defeated, despised, meaningless Israel did become the light to the world that Isaiah prophesied. What they thought was the worst thing that could have happened to them actually became the best thing that could have happened to them! When the Babylonians defeated Israel and brought people back to Babylon in captivity, they weren’t the only ones who left Israel. No, thousands of people fled Israel. They scattered. They went in every direction. Suddenly, there were Jewish villages popping up in every corner of the world. Suddenly, nations that had never heard of Israel became aware of this strange religion that believed in one God and, most importantly, did their best to live in a way that brought dignity to everyone. Suddenly, Israel discovered that their real strength was not in being like the other nations with material wealth and power. Their strength was their faith in God and their dedication to living according to God’s law. Faith, not money, not power. Faith made them the example God intended for them to be. They didn’t have to be big. They didn’t have to be strong. All they had to be was faithful. God did the rest.

Would it shock you today, Collingswood Presbyterian Church, that God speaks the same words to you that God spoke to the dispirited people of Israel? Would it shock you to realize that God has chosen every one of us in this room for a special and sacred mission? Would it shock you to know that despite the evidence of your eyes, despite the evidence of our financial statements, despite the evidence of membership directory, God still has a plan for this congregation, both individually and collectively?

Hear the good news! You are chosen by God to do great things in this world! I am chosen by God to do great things in this world! We are chosen by God to do great things in this world! Over and over and over again, the Bible is filled with stories of individuals and groups and nations who by the world’s standards were at the very bottom of society. Yet God used the least, the last, and the lost to transform society. As the Church of Jesus Christ, we will not, we cannot play the game the way society does. Here, we celebrate weakness, we fight the oppressors, we stand for human dignity. In short, the things that the world around sees as so important and so worthy of copying, we reject as being foolish. God has called us. God has called you. God has called me. Together, we are and we will be a light to the world. Ask God to show us, ask God to show you God’s plan and, just like God did for Israel, it will happen!