

“Lacking in Nothing”
1 Corinthians 1:4-9; Isaiah 49:1-7
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2nd Sunday After Epiphany
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“I’ve worked for nothing. I’ve nothing to show for a life of hard work.” So says the mysterious servant in this passage in Isaiah.

He could have been speaking for any number of people I’ve listened to recently.

He could have been speaking the Black pastor who said to me last week, “I’ve never been so down on America. The numbers of people who are armed is frightening. You can’t go anywhere - not even church - without the possibility of violence.”

He made that comment before three white nationalists were arrested this week on charges that they were planning “malicious activity” at an upcoming gun rally in Virginia.

Isaiah could have been speaking for a different person I listened to this week who shared that his own spotty church attendance was a result, in part, of being worn out by all our talk of justice. “I worked so hard to bring diversity, equity, and inclusion into my workplace,” he told me, “against so much resistance from people there.

And yet at some point I started realizing that what I needed from church wasn’t more talk of how to change the world. I needed my own thirsty well to be filled up.”

Isaiah could have been speaking for my friend who moved out to the county because in his words, “I couldn’t risk my 12 year-old Black son to Baltimore City as bad as it is,” or any number of church folk who have moved away from Baltimore because in their words, “I was finally exhausted by the failure to feel safe, or to feel like my diversity was recognized, or to feel like things would ever get better.

“I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity” the servant in Isaiah says,

and that servant could have been speaking for any number of us. The nurse working in Shock Trauma watching bodies felled by bullets or opioids over and over and over.

The neighborhood leader watching more vacants springing up to replace the ones they work so hard to eradicate.

The teacher struggling to teach amidst all the trauma, the rising levels of anxiety and depression in our children.

The professor watching our whole society call knowledge itself into question. The pastors - almost everyone I know managing overall decline in the church in a

Trumpian age when the leading emotional state of many congregants seems to be rage and dissatisfaction.

On this weekend, so many times in the past, I have turned to Dr. King and other Civil Rights icons for edification. Turned to the Rosa Parks and Ella Bakers, Diane Nashes and Fred Shuttlesworths, Andy Youngs and Bob Moses of the world for inspiration. They found a way to keep pushing and brought about a significant downpayment in changes that many of us want to see. They found a way to keep hoping, keep trusting, keep believing while struggling through conditions just as bad or worse as the ones we face today.

I have looked to their stories for examples of hope and courage and so often found them. In bus seats they refused to concede, in voting rights they refused to yield, in civil rights legislation they fought for and won.

Indeed that's what I thought I had found again this year in the Freedom Rides of 1961. Those freedom riders caught my attention this year because of a comment Taylor Branch made to me one year after he overheard me poo pooing the hymn "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms" as the sappy, sentimental hymn of my Baptist youth.

"What a blessedness, what a peace is mine, Leaning on the everlasting arms."

"You know," he told me that day, "that's one of the hymns they sang in Montgomery, Alabama in 1961 when the Klan surrounded the church at night with Dr. King and John Lewis and Diane Nash and all the Freedom Riders trapped inside." "Leaning, leaning, Safe and secure from all alarms. Leaning, leaning, leaning on the everlasting arms." The words suddenly sounded a lot less sentimental.

That night in the church followed one of the most courageous days of the civil rights movement. The Freedom Riders, I hope you recall, were simply interracial bus loads of people - mostly young people - who decided to test their right to ride together through the south. The segregationist governments and the people they represented threatened violence and enacted it across their ride. When they got to Montgomery and dismounted the bus at the segregated bus station, the local police escort disappeared, allowing mobs of white people to kick, beat, punch, and strike the Freedom Riders with fists and pipes and rocks. Protestors retreated to the First Baptist Church and were later surrounded by threatening mobs and the Alabama National Guard forcing an all night standoff between the Kennedy White House and the Alabama governor who had declared martial law.¹

¹ Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963*, see especially "11: Baptism on Wheels" and "12: The Summer of Freedom Rides," pp. 412 - 491.

Courage indeed. But what struck me this year, was not just the courage of that day and night but the dissention that leaders in the movement navigated that next day. Young activists called on Dr. King to join them on the freedom rides and he politely but forcefully declined. He was already on probation and another arrest could have landed him in jail for 3 months, too long of a time he felt, to be absent from movement leadership. Some of the young people saw this as cowardice and said as much. “I’m on probation, and I’m going,” said one. “Me, too,” said another.²

Maybe I noticed the dissenion this year because this kind of internal dissension, stress, judgment, and critique has been at the heart of just about every organization I’ve been a part of this past year and I sense the weariness of so many would be warriors for justice.

Maybe I noticed it because it seems to me that people who are committed to justice-making in their lives and in their world sometimes seem to tear each other apart more than the external opposition. We’re all susceptible to addiction to our own self-righteousness.

Or maybe I noticed it because when I compare the input of my own efforts toward transformation with the current state of affairs in the city, in the Church, and in the world, it’s easy to conclude with Isaiah’s servant that I’ve nothing to show for a life of hard work.

Whatever the reasons, the thing that I noticed in all the texts this week is that God could care less about our feelings of limited impact. The servant in Isaiah - whose identity is a mystery - says,

“I’ve nothing to show for a life of hard work”

And God replies

“But that’s not a big enough job for my servant—

just to recover the tribes of Jacob,

merely to round up the strays of Israel.

I’m setting you up as a light for the nations

so that my salvation becomes global!”

Hear that again - Isaiah says, “I’ve accomplished nothing with my life” and God’s response is, “you know, servant, I’ve thought it over and I’ve decided that rescuing your own nation from the exile is not enough. I’m going to use you to save the whole world!” How does that even make sense?

² Ibid, 467.

Then you read Paul's letter to the divided church at Corinth, a church threatening to come apart because of internal divisions. "I give thanks to God," Paul says, because God has given you everything you need - "you are not lacking in any spiritual gift." You are lacking in nothing to be who God has called you to be, to do what God has called you to do.

And in John's Gospel Jesus says to random strangers - fisher people - on the beach - you want to know God for yourselves? "Come and see."

It's like the text is saying to exiles nursing their wounds, church folk having trouble breaking bread with people they don't think are worthy enough, and ordinary working folk who never thought of themselves as anything other than ordinary, "yes, you will make a difference, but not because you are smarter, or wiser, or harder working, or more woke than anybody else. You'll make a difference because I called you for a purpose, I've given you everything you need. You are lacking in nothing."

Which seems crazy to me right now in this time and this place, so crazy, I'm afraid to say it to you. It's like God saying to us, "You can defeat white supremacy and usher in a new age of equality and justice and peace and inclusion because I've given you everything you need to do it." "You will prosper as a church because you lack nothing. I've given you everything you need." "Your lives will make a difference because, hey people, this isn't some two bit hustler who called you into this work. I'm the LORD!"

That's the message of these texts which is easier to see than it is to claim. It sounds really arrogant and self-centered and delusional to me. "God has called me or called us for a big purpose in the world." It's like the kinds of things that people involved in cults say to each other. TV preacher crazy talk. I can see it in the text, but can I own it for me or for you?

And yet sometimes I wonder how our lives would be different if we actually believed in God's call and claim on our lives. If we spent less time whining over the things that are missing in our public discourse and started noticing the gifts that God has given to contribute to our common life.

If we spent less time fretting about what we're missing in our congregation and more time recognizing the abundant gifts that God has given us to share together.

If we worried less over our sense of our own limitations and listened more to God's purposes for us, God's call to us in the world. Because which is more self-centered? Our confidence in our own cynical judgment about what's possible in the world right now,

or our confidence in God's sense of what human beings are capable of?

Our lives would be different, maybe not in the way that we think. I don't know whether we'd be able to reverse the tide of the fear that has overtaken so many of our

neighbors, so many of us. I don't know whether we'd be able to stop the next war in the Middle East, or the next shooter at home. I doubt we'd avoid legitimate disagreements between people of good faith who want to see the planet saved, peace realized, justice enacted.

I just think that if we believed God had called us to stand for justice, we, too, would be able to do things like sing "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms" with the Klan threatening to burn the place down.

If we believed God had called us to embody the kingdom of heaven with people of all races, religions, and creeds, we'd be able to take whatever beatings we had to take.

If we believed God had called us to ride on the Freedom bus or not we'd be able to sleep at night knowing that the great determining factor in the success of our projects is not our own competence or will, but God's.

If we believed that God had called us to a higher purpose then we'd be able to live a life of purpose with a peace of heart that no President, no violent actor, no bully could ever take away.

Which sounds to me a lot like the kingdom of heaven on earth. The one where we get to taste peace, and freedom, and justice, and joy together before it is fully realized. The one where we are too busy trusting in God's love to fear. The one where we see that abundant life isn't something we wait for at the end of time. It's already among us in shared meals, and shared tears, and shared work that heals the world.

If we believed that God had called us for a purpose. If we believed we lacked nothing. If we believed in the power of God's love more than the limitations of our own. If we believed.