

Pastor's Message – 1/22/2023
Isaiah 49:1-7

Have you ever wondered about the meaning of life? Have you ever or have you ever heard someone ask, "Why am I here?" You are probably aware that there are two creation stories in Genesis—one in Genesis 1 and another in Genesis 2. Well, there's another story from creation that never made it into the Book of Genesis about God's plan for His creatures that I can share with you today.

On the first day, God created the dog and said: "Sit all day by the door of your house and bark at anyone who comes in or walks past. For this, I will give you a life span of 20 years."

The dog said: "That's a long time to be barking. How about only 10 years and I'll give you back the other 10?"

So, God agreed.

On the second day, God created the monkey and said: "Entertain people, do tricks, and make them laugh. For this, I'll give you a 20-year life span."

The monkey said: "Monkey tricks for 20 years? That's a pretty long time to perform. How about I give you back 10 like the dog did?"

And God agreed.

On the third day, God created the cow and said: "You must go into the field with the farmer all day long and suffer under the sun, have calves and give milk to support the farmer's family. For this, I will give you a life span of 60 years."

The cow said: "That's kind of a tough life you want me to live for 60 years. How about 20 and I'll give back the other 40?"

And God agreed again.

On the fourth and fifth day, God was busy creating other things, but on the sixth day, God created man and said: "Eat, sleep, play, marry and enjoy your life. For this, I'll give you 20 years."

But man said: "Only 20 years? Could you possibly give me my 20, the 40 the cow gave back, the 10 the monkey gave back, and the 10 the dog gave back -- that makes 80, okay?"

"Okay," God said. "As long as you're sure."

So that is why for our first 20 years we eat, sleep, play and enjoy ourselves. For the next 40 years we slave in the sun to support our family. For the next 10 years we do tricks to entertain the grandchildren. And for the last 10 years we sit on the front porch and bark at everybody.

And that is the meaning of life. That is why we are here.

Our Bible reading for today suggests to us that we are created for a purpose; God has known since before we were born what we are created to do. And like many Bible passages, today's text can be read in several ways.

First, it can be taken as a description solely of a new, transformed Israel's role in the service of God. Second, it can mirror the prophet's own ministry, with its call, its failures and discouragements, its source of strength and encouragement in God, and its mission to the nations. From that point of view, probably every pastor can identify with its words. But third, the text can be applied to every Christian. Every member of the church is called to be a servant and evangel or missionary for the Lord, spreading the gospel both near and far. And it is this latter interpretation that I want to focus on today.

"The Lord called me before my birth" (v. 1). The scriptures have the profound understanding that God creates each child in the mother's womb for a purpose. Certainly that was the prophet Jeremiah's understanding (Jeremiah 1:5) and the Apostle Paul's (Galatians 1:15). But that is true not only of such special prophets and apostles, but also of each one of us. God makes us for a purpose, for a place in his plan, carefully knitting us together with bones and sinews (Job 10:11), shaping each of our individual body forms and DNA and physical and mental capabilities, in order that he may use us to work out his will in the world. We are "called" individuals, intended for a role in God's work.

You may not think about yourself in that way. You may not use the language of being *born* for some role. You may not speak of being *named* by God. You may not even characterize yourself as being *called* by God. But if, at some point, it comes to you that you're in the place that you need to be because you can do some good there, it's worth considering whether *that may indeed be evidence of a call from God*.

Last week I asked if you think that a congregation like ours just happens by chance. Are we a random gathering of folks from a certain place who share a common taste in religion? If God knows us before we are born, God has called and chosen each one of us with great care, so that together we may provide every gift needed for the building of our church, the serving of our community, the praising of our God.

Each one of you are God's gift to the world and to the church, and every gift is needed. Every individual is unique and special and needed. The Church is less when you are not here and active and when you do not share the gifts God has given you and created you with. As we move through life, it's good to take time to consider and to reconsider whether we have some sense of being named by God, of being born to some role, or simply of being the right person in the right place at the right time -- which can be one form that God naming us as his own takes.

And then, recognizing that our very DNA has shaped us to be God's person in a particular setting, we can decide whether we will serve God or live with the torment of turning to other things instead.

Our Bible passage says today, “from within the womb [God] called [you] by name.” And of course, that is what happens in our baptisms. We are declared to be God's children, belonging to him and to no other. He gives us his family name, Christian, and makes us a part of his household, as his beloved son or daughter. From that time on, we belong to God's covenant people, and we live and move and have our being always in relationship with our Lord.

Our inclination may be to identify Isaiah's servant as Jesus, but the servant may also be any person who bears witness to God, leads others to God and reveals God to us, or who widens and challenges our understanding of God and God's mission for us. The text today encourages us not to stay put where we are, hoarding what we know and what we have and even who we are created to be, but to widen our circle of faith by sharing and witnessing.

“You will do more than restore the people of Israel,” God says. You will do more than move and live and associate with your families or your church, for you are made and called to do more. Your call isn't just about you and it isn't just about your church; it's about the whole world. We sometimes limit ourselves to our families or our church or our community and spend all of our effort in those arenas, thinking we're doing good things. And you are, but God may be saying to you, “You will do more than restore the people of Israel,” [you] are like a sharpened arrow in his quiver.”

God calls his servant to bring the light of salvation to the nations. The servant tells how Yahweh called and chose him before he was born. Yet, he feels that his labor was in vain. Then Yahweh speaks to him and becomes his strength. That is encouraging, because it says God's dreams for our lives, or for the church's life, is bigger. Don't settle for less. Which doesn't mean we should be workaholics or beat ourselves up if we don't accomplish everything, but God's dream isn't fulfilled yet in our lives.

We can change the world, but we may not necessarily see the change: “But my work seems so useless! I have spent my strength for nothing and to no purpose.” “Yet I leave it all in the LORD's hand.” Even when you are chosen, even when you are doing the right thing, you don't always see the change you think you should. It doesn't mean you are not speaking as you should; it doesn't mean that you are not called. It just means that, sometimes, it takes time.”

God takes us as we are and uses us as we are. Though the darkness may seem empty and cold, through all the trials that life sends our way, the LORD will comfort you and His love will set you free! We are not worthy, we are not yet perfected in love, but God calls us to be faithful and true and to keep on the journey of becoming – of allowing God to sanctify us and make us more like Jesus.

Distance runners talk about a "second wind." The experience is of being out of breath and strength and then feeling breath and strength return, enabling the runner to continue with higher efficiency. Colloquially "second wind" describes any transition from exhaustion to new strength.

Isaiah is exhausted. "'But my work seems so useless!," he says. "I have spent my strength for nothing and to no purpose." The prophet is pained at the discrepancy between his effort for God and the lack of results. He hasn't lost faith, he's just tired.

When success isn't popping up like a rabbit from a magician's hat, God grants a spiritual second wind. God confirms and expands the prophet's call: "You will do more than restore the people of Israel to me. I will make you a light to the Gentiles, and you will bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

You don't have to give in to the "Jonah complex:" that tendency to resist or flee a higher calling. Those called to serve may wrestle with feelings of unworthiness. It is a common experience among those called by God to challenging tasks; Isaiah (6.5), Jeremiah (1.6), and Moses (Ex. 4.10) all gave excuses. Jonah ran away.

Someone quipped that it's hard to steer or drive a car that's in park. God has already created you with a special and unique set of skills and abilities and graces. Those qualities don't go away. God knows what you are capable of with His help. All you have to do is keep moving or start moving again if you've been in park. All you need to do, to realize that you are like a sharp arrow in God's quiver is to be faithful and do as much as you can for as long as you can.

I remember a television commercial from a while back in which newly retired Indianapolis Colt and Denver Bronco quarterback Peyton Manning is talking to an old man on a park bench. Manning wonders about his future and what he will do now that he's retired, and the old man gives Manning this advice, "Work as long as you can." Those are God's words too. "Work as long as you are able. I've given you all you need to do what you are called to do."

The apostle Paul agrees, "...you don't need a thing, you've got it all! All God's gifts are right in front of you as you wait expectantly for our Master Jesus to arrive on the scene for the Finale. And not only that, but God himself is right alongside to keep you steady and on track until things are all wrapped up by Jesus. God, who got you started in this spiritual adventure, shares with us the life of his Son and our Master Jesus. He will never give up on you. Never forget that."

God gives second and third and fourth wind: enough to work His plan and His desire for you and your world throughout your whole life.