

January 15, 2017
Isaiah 49:1-7
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“Called and Equipped”

Good morning! Last week we celebrated the feast of Epiphany and the wise men’s arrival in Bethlehem and remembered that they returned home another way. We actually celebrated that feast with a feast, thanks to the Fellowship Team, and we celebrated the wise men’s gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, thanks to Jenny Cooper. But, as you may remember, we talked about the idea of a journey, and journeys aren’t made in a day. Journeys -- at least the ones which move us spiritually as well as physically -- take a season, or years or a lifetime. So I want us to stay on this journey for a few more weeks, through the season of Epiphany.

Last week I characterized this as the Hero’s Journey: I didn’t make up this term, it was popularized by mythologist Joseph Campbell to talk about stories which are part of many, many cultures. Stories about leaving home and the journey of maturity. Stories about how boys become men and girls become women. Stories about identity and transformation. Stories about losing who we thought we were and finding who we’re called to be. Although these stories are common to many cultures, for Christians, this is the journey of discipleship: a journey which means leaving something familiar and returning another way.

Our text from Isaiah 49 provides lots of opportunities for interesting theological rabbit trails which could take us off the main path today. I will point some of them out as we go by, but I’d like to try to keep us all together, so if your mind wanders off through this sermon -- in the unlikely event that this ever happens -- here is the path I encourage you to come back to: God knows us and loves us and has a purpose

for our lives. Got that? God knows us and loves us and has a purpose for our lives. That's our path.

Isaiah 49 is the second of a set of four Servant Songs in Isaiah -- the others are in chapter 40, 50 and 52-53. The first person speech in Isaiah 49 which begins with "Listen to me, O coastlands, Pay attention, you peoples from far away!" is not the author of Isaiah speaking as himself, he is speaking as the servant of God. He says, "The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me. And God said to me, 'You are my servant in whom I will be glorified.'" (49:1a, 3) There is a lot of important stuff here. We're not going down the rabbit trail of right to life or pro-choice, but this passage, and other places in the Old Testament -- Psalm 139 and Jeremiah 1 -- suggest that God knows us before we are even born. That God is involved in the most intimate construction of our lives. God may know us better than we know ourselves. God knows us and loves us. And this passage and the one from Jeremiah say that there is something God wants us to do: "You are my servant in whom I will be glorified." God knows us and loves us and has a purpose for our lives.

It should come as no surprise that most of us don't come out of our mother's womb knowing God's purpose for our lives. Purpose is for grown-ups. Babies need to grow, children need to play, teenagers need to sleep and make their parents lose sleep and generally wonder has happened to their sweet little children. Some people, regardless of their age, have never left home and taken responsibility for being an adult, some people don't discover their purpose until later in life. Some people find a different purpose in the second half of their lives: this journey can happen in many way, but for many of us, young adulthood is when we leave home and begin to discover who we are and what God's purpose is for our lives.

Last week I mentioned the movie Star Wars as a familiar contemporary version of the Hero's Journey. I won't name names, but it has come to my attention that not everyone is familiar with this movie, so I'm going to ask the Media Team to play a clip of it here to illustrate this idea of discovering who we are, and how discovering who we are can affect our idea of what our purpose may be.

[YouTube clip from Star Wars: A New Hope]

I chose this clip in part because when we discover who we are and what our purpose is, there is usually some push back. “I don’t want to go there! I’m not doing that! I can’t afford to get involved!” That is a natural response, it is an honest response, and for some people, that’s the end of the discussion. I’m not going on this journey; I can’t leave home. And so we don’t. But sometimes we don’t have a choice: Herod was standing in the way and the wise men had no choice but to go home by another road. Mary and Joseph had to flee to Egypt or their son would have been killed along with the other baby boys in Bethlehem. Whether we choose to go, or something forces us to go on this journey, one thing is certain: God knows us and loves us and has a purpose for our lives. God is with us. We may not like the things we discover about ourselves; we may not like the things we realize about our families: things we took for granted as children until we saw that other families are not like ours. That is part of the journey. Part of growing up is realizing that grown-ups have choices, and grown-ups take responsibility for what they choose. The journey of discipleship means that to the best of our limited ability, we choose to follow Jesus Christ and God’s purpose for our lives.

No journey which changes us, no journey which has meaning is easy. Part of growing up means letting go of being a child: of expecting other people to fix things or to take care of us. We learn that the world is bigger than we are, there are things that happen to us which are not fair, there are things that we don’t understand, and things which we cannot control. We have to own up to the messes we’ve made and clean up after ourselves. Even when we’re pretty sure we’re on the right path, it can be rough going. Here is a promise which gives me hope and comfort: God meets us wherever we are. Your own hero’s journey begins wherever you are, whenever you make the choice to accept that God knows you and loves you and has a purpose for your life. No one, not even God, can force you to accept this truth. No one, not even the people who love you best, can accept this truth on your behalf. Nobody can make this journey for you.

This doesn’t mean that you have to make the journey alone. Look around you: these people are here, and we gather here every Sunday because God knows us and loves us and has a purpose for our lives.

Some weeks that's hard to believe: that's why we're here. Some weeks we can't wait to tell other people: that's why we're here. Verse 5 says "I am honored in the sight of the Lord, and my God has become my strength." We're here to share how God is our strength, that we are weak, but he is strong.

A turning point in my life happened in 2004 when I was elected to position of national responsibility in the Church of the Brethren. I had thought about the nomination, I had prayed about it, it sounded like something I might enjoy, I allowed my name to be submitted. I didn't expect to actually be elected: I hadn't done anything quite like this before, and I found that as I prepared for the first meeting, I was terrified. There must have been some mistake; people were bound to find out that I was a fraud, and I was probably going to be dismissed in disgrace. I can't remember if I requested or if David Bibbee offered to have an anointing service for me. But after choir one Wednesday evening, we gathered in the narthex of the Seventh Day Adventist Church where we were meeting, and sisters and brothers from Creekside prayed for me. Here is the prayer I remember -- not who said it, but these words: "God does not call the equipped; God equips the called." Clearly I was not equipped: I'd never done anything like this before, I had no theological education, I had no ministry experience -- I was a stay-at-home mom who did freelance lettering, for heaven's sake. But I was called, and I decided to go.

This story is not about how amazing I was on the Program and Arrangements Committee. I hope I did an adequate job: I doubt if anyone remembers. My story is that this journey that is still en route - - serving on that committee led me to the conviction that I needed to pursue theological education, even though I was NOT going to be a pastor. Of course my professors just smiled and nodded when I said that. And that story led to --well, you know some of the rest. I am not a hero, but I am someone who believes steadfastly and passionately that God knows me and loves me and has a purpose for my life. I try every day to stay on that path. And God has been faithful again and again and again.

Last week I invited you to consider when you left home. I was delighted to hear that some of you actually discussed that, and heard some stories you didn't know. Here are some questions to carry with

you from this place, and some bread for the journey: what did you have to leave behind in order to grow up? What ideas or convictions about yourself have had to change? What do you need for the journey you're on now? Remember, God meets you wherever you are. God knows you and loves you and has a purpose for your life. Amen.