

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson – Isaiah 49:1-7

Is life about big things or about little things? about the big events and causes of peoples and nations and powers? – or about the little challenges and joys and setbacks and successes of each day, of each life? Well, the answer that I find to such a question – an answer given I think with some wisdom and I know with a bit of obnoxiousness and playfulness ...is life about big things or little things?...the answer I think is “yes” – yes to big things and yes to little things – yes to each.

The heading to the liturgy today says we are observing the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity – that is a big thing – it is about the whole church – about Christians everywhere – it is about the big idea of a very divided and fractured church in the world praying for unity – for healing of divisions, and unity of witness and service and faith; it is a big idea – and this marks the 100th year of this time of prayer for unity – an issue from before us that will stretch beyond us – a big thing. ...the heading to our liturgy also says we are observing the life and death and legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. in our worship – that is a big thing; an observance shared throughout our nation, and connected to peoples and issues throughout the world. We have already in our liturgy today said and prayed and sung words about justice and peace, about oppression and action – those are big issues; we recognize the realities of racism past, present and future – we recognize the transforming power of non-violence and faithfulness. This is an observance and issue that has come before us and will stretch beyond us – it is a big thing.

Those are the big things of this day – so what about us? – we’re the little things – our little lives in that big picture. I really resonate with the focus on the big things – I think it’s critical for us to be connected to the observances and issues of this day: to lift up Christian Unity as we seek to be a part of God’s grace and love expressed to the world through the Church; to lift up the life of Dr. King and the issues of race and reconciliation his legacy gives to us. Those are good things. But the grand scale of such things can seem to be on a scale that is disconnected from our own lives – a big-ness that does not easily come alongside our little lives... for me that is partly because the issues themselves seem so vast and complex – sure, concerning Christian Unity I may

know a bit more than the average person about church history and all the divisions and connections and dynamics of Christian denominations in the world today – and some of you do too – others not – but I am no expert, and in the immenseness of the issue, I can tune out – I imagine you can too.

And I know some important things about Dr. King - I recognize issues of racism and discrimination – but it is a big issue – complex and broad – rooted in history and society – it is a challenge to get a grasp of all that is involved – and I imagine it is similar for you...

It's also a challenge because in the big-ness of it all, there can be a sense of my little life of having no real impact – no real way changing anything that is even a blip on the screen of such big realities. I am very certain of the fact that this little observance in our worship today will not cause the world tomorrow to find itself a place of perfect Christian unity and free from racism and intolerance. And even though that is an exaggeration which none of us would expect anyways – there can be something in us that pulls back when our little lives don't seem to change the big things...those tensions are there with such big issues in our little lives – a tension that can feel like either/or....

And in the midst of that the prophet Isaiah has something to say to us: the Spirit of God has a word to speak to us – a word about what it is to live in the midst of big and little as a child of God.

Much of the story of the Old Testament is the story of the people of Israel – that's not all that is there – but Israel is much of the focus: while that story of God and Israel does involve at points a wide scope of people and events over many centuries – in reality it is quite a small slice of life and time in the bigger picture of the whole world and history. And the thing about that is, that often seems just the way God wants, intends, it to be: God's focus is on this little nation – this little people – not on the whole big world. Of course, it's not nearly that simple – there is also a steady voice that this God of Israel is the one God of all; that the God made known to this little group in Palestine is the God of all creation; that the truth revealed to this one small people is the truth for all of life – but still, much of the focus is on that little slice of God and Israel.

And then there comes from the prophet Isaiah this figure of the Servant – an image that emerges in a time when this little nation of Israel that once had at least some sort of power and

stature is truly brought down to its small size – defeated, exiled – the real political and religious powers are very clear on the world stage, and it is not Israel. But in this most diminished of times, this enigmatic figure of the Servant is revealed – a Servant that is to receive and live out God’s word and will in a new way – a Servant that at times seems to be the whole people of Israel, that at times seems to be one person. And in the unfolding of this revelation of this intriguing new Servant figure comes a most remarkable word from God – God says to the Servant: ‘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.’

That is a stunning word – there in a nutshell is this clear word from God that the saving light of God is not meant only for this small slice of people and place – the light of God’s saving ways are to be for the ends of the earth – God’s light and life and love are for all people. It was a word that spoke to the core of Israel’s identity – connecting them as God’s people to the God of all people; and it is a word that speaks to the big themes of this day – that reflects and encompasses themes of a church seeking global unity and racial reconciliation.

But before we jump right away to those big things – to the magnificent word given here of the light of God to all the nations – we need to see the little thing that remains present here. This word from God to the Servant does NOT say: ‘it is unimportant whatever happens to this little slice of people – so God will use you to bring about this big vision of God’s light for the whole world’; it does NOT say that this people Israel does not matter – does NOT say only the big things matter.

What this word from God DOES say is that they both matter – what this word from God does do is hold together the reality and tension, and really the mystery, of how both the little and the big matter to God. What this word from God does say is that of course God is concerned for the peace and wholeness of this little slice called Israel – but that in a most profound way its salvation is connected to and meant to serve the light of God for all; it says that God is about a saving power for the ends of the earth – God is about big things - but that in a most profound way, it is through the little things – what to some might even seem insignificant - that God’s light shines to the nations.

And that word of God speaks directly to those tensions of the little and the big felt and found in us – and brings some meaning and direction to us in the uncertainty and helplessness we can feel there. This word allows us to say that of course we see most clearly our own little lives – and are focused on the needs and possibilities that happen there – there are important things in each of our lives – a lot to face and figure out, to experience and be; and of course God is present there - God’s light and saving grace are meant for that little slice that is me and you and us. And of course there are big issues that surround and divide and challenge us all – broad needs in this big world that are daunting and overwhelming – that can leave us uncertain or discouraged; and of course God is present there too – God’s saving purpose is great enough to embrace all that is broken in this big world... ..and the mystery and revelation from God is that God holds both – and that neither the little nor the big will truly come into focus for us until we see that common thread – that God is present in each; and even more, this revelation that God’s way, God’s choice, is to reach the big with the little.

If I were able to preach like Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr. – which I am not – but I can have a dream too...! Or even if were to imagine Dr. King preaching about something like this – I would him imagine building up something of a rhythm to conclude this sermon – a pattern that would go something like this...

* you have a little life, Gordon Wiersma – and your little life is important; you have needs and gifts and brokenness and concerns and possibilities; and the light of God – God’s saving grace is for your little life; but it is too light, too little, a thing, Gordon, that your life be only about you – God’s will, God’s choice is to use your life as a light for all – to use your life to touch this big world with the saving power of God

* you have a little life you, and you, and you, and you – and your little life is important – in all that is there the light of God, God’s saving grace, is present for you; but it is too light, too little, a thing, you, that your life be only about you – God’s will, God’s choice is to use your life as a light for all – to use your life to touch this big world with the saving power of God...

* you are a little church – Hope Church – and you are important – God’s saving grace is for you...

* you are a little denomination – Reformed Church in America – and you are important – God’s saving grace is for you...

* you are a little town – Holland Michigan– and you are important – God’s saving grace is for you...

* you are one nation – United States of America (and in God’s eyes quite small) – and you are important – God’s saving grace is for you...

* you are one religion – Church of Jesus Christ - (and in God’s eyes quite small) - and you are important – God’s saving grace is for you...

but it is too light, too little a thing, for me & you & Hope Church and Holland and the United States and the Church of Jesus Christ, to be only about yourself or itself. God’s will, God’s choice, is to use your life as a light for all – for each slice to touch this big world with the light of God’s grace and love...

...Perhaps Dr. King might be pleased with something like that – and I imagine he would recognize too how difficult that is – how we so often do make it either/or – how we do not fulfill that calling. Israel struggled to follow that word of God – the church struggles – I do – our church does...

...but in case we would ever wonder about the power of this truth – Dr. King’s life would point us to the Servant who embodied God’s light and grace with his life – the Servant who we worship this day as we seek for how our little lives can touch issues of unity and race and reconciliation. Dr. King would point us to the Servant who is Jesus Christ – the Servant who in his one little life and death and resurrection fulfills Isaiah’s stunning word of God: to be the light and saving grace of God to the ends of the earth – and it is in that light and salvation of the Servant Jesus Christ that our little lives find the way as servants into this big world. Amen.