

“Too Light A Thing”

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.”

Too Light A Thing

Isaiah 49:1-7

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I.

Tis the season for our annual meeting of the congregation and corporation, which will take place after worship on Sunday February 5th. Given this, I have been reflecting a great deal on the church and, as I told the Session, the greatest challenge I believe we will face as a *congregation* in the coming years is to get to know each other and, in doing so, to usher in whatever next, new version of this church we will become. Which, I certainly do not have to tell you, are good problems to have. So, part of our challenge is to begin by being *thankful* for it; the challenge, I mean.

These days, *very* few churches are casting their gaze upon the horizon. Instead, most have their eyes fixed on the past, stand navel-gazing or, at best, struggling to figuring out where to place their next step if and when that will even be possible. Frankly, most days I feel as if we are being *hurdled* forward as a church and I'm just scrambling to keep up.

II.

Certainly not to throw a stone, but by way of example of this, you may have seen the recent news release by the Diocese of Ogdensburg which is planning to have only *one* priest serving their South Colton, Potsdam *and* Canton churches. Admittedly, I do not know the specific numbers but I think it is safe to assume that the Catholic Church in Potsdam *and* in Canton *each* have larger congregations than ours here on the Park. As someone who has been in parish ministry for almost 30 years, I can absolutely tell you that having just *one* person being responsible for the pastoral care for *all* of those people is utter madness.

Returning to our own church, just one example of the different order of challenge *we* face is learning the names of all the kids in our congregation; and there are lots of them. Have *no* doubt, in the coming years there will be more. This winter, I'd like to propose we undertake a kid's photo directory so that when I say Sebastian or Frederick or Audrey, for instance, you know about whom I am speaking.

III.

There are, of course, other organizational and programmatic changes we will need to make, some already overdue, particularly in regard to our teenagers. Though the idea of having a Youth Group once more seems a far bridge to cross (to be sure) cross it we must and *soon*. Make no mistake about, on this matter we are going to need a miracle; *again*. Some player or, more probably, a group of players to be named who will step up to provide the leadership required to start moving forward.

So, how do we begin? Not just in terms of a kid's directory or Youth Group, specifically, but more generally with regard to the challenges I articulated at the start of the sermon: to get to know one another and to usher in the next manifestation of the Church on the Park. What I am about to suggest may seem beside the point but, I assure you, it is *precisely* the point: we need to get about the business of *talking* with one another.

IV.

Having determined the "what" we need to do, we now proceed to the "how" we are going to do it: by making real, concrete changes in our building and in our lives in order to create opportunities for those conversations to take place. I am not suggesting a New Year's resolution kind of thing which starts off strong and, then, fizzles out all together. Instead, what we are seeking is *intentional* and *incremental* change; *and* extending to ourselves a *full* measure of grace when the change we seek is slow to materialize and we find ourselves, once again, needing to get back on the horse.

First, let us not let the tail wag the dog. Let us put our hand to the tiller, tap the brakes, unfold the map, take a look around, consider what matters most to us, and be intentional in thought and deed. Second, we will take small bites and chew thoroughly. We will slowly, enact gradually, do not overdo, start with the low hanging fruit, recognize and celebrate the small victories. And, *whatever* it takes, and *how ever long* it takes, keep climbing back up in that saddle again.

V.

We each need to wade into the mystical movement of the church by putting ourselves in situations to know and be known by others; the "magic" happens in the small moments. If you can't make it to church *every* Sunday try to do

so just once a month. If you don't have or want a Google account to participate in the live chat, get into the habit of letting me know you're there by text or email right after you join the stream. Come to the potluck next Sunday and sit by someone you don't know. Stand in front of the Picture House in Fellowship Hall and learn one new name. Have a conversation with a kid from church, and ask them what *they* like to do. Sort clothes at the spring rummage sale for just an hour. Invite a new woman to Circle or Book Group. Winers, commence to whining. Share a meal or have coffee outside church. Volunteer to do coffee hour. Be the person who remembers to ring the bell each Sunday before worship; once you get the "swing of it" show another.

VI.

Go to Coffee Hour and strike up a conversation. Pick a Sunday and ask Andrea to simply sit-in on a Church School class, or speak to Kate or Emily about doing the same in the nursery. Send Linda news of yourself, your kid or family so we can share it with the congregation; you aren't bragging, you are *helping*. Mail a birthday or anniversary card to someone, even if you don't know them. So many older folks from of our congregation have lived such rich and interesting lives, call them up and hear their story. If you don't know with whom to start, ask me and I'll give you a name and their number. For you parents with younger kids, invite one or two other families, within and/or beyond the congregation, to come play Fellowship Hall some afternoon or evening and share a snack or meal. *Whatever* it is, and however crazy you might think it to be, let's just give it a whirl. Let us give ourselves permission to do *whatever* it takes to start talking to each other and get to know one another.

VII.

Now, it was not by accident that I shared with the kids my secret affinity for Peanut M&Ms, nor was it out of the blue. I am not sure if you saw it, but M&M's recently made it into the national news; and, apparently, it is *quite* a thing. Unsurprisingly, I took a keen interest. Mars, makers of M&M'S, kicked up quite a bit of dust with its latest candy pack, which features an all-female set of characters, including Purple, its newest addition which put the company once again knee-deep into culture wars controversy. A limited



edition all-female pack which will include *only* Purple, Brown and Green, the candy's trio of female characters, who are upside-down on the package to "celebrate women everywhere who are flipping the status quo." A portion of profits will go to organizations that are "uplifting and empowering women," including [She Is The Music](#) and [We Are Moving the Needle](#), nonprofits that support women in the music industry.

VIII.

The all-female pack quickly sparked "culture wars" outrage on right-leaning news networks and on social media. One anchor said the feminist-forward pack emboldens China, "If this is what you need for validation, an M&M that is the color that you think is associated with feminism, then I'm worried about you. I think that makes China say, 'Oh, good, keep focusing on that. Keep focusing on giving people their own color M&M'S while we take over all of the mineral deposits in the entire world.'" (A bit of a tangential leap in *my* mind, but ok.)

This, however, is just the tip of the iceberg. In addition to adding Purple to the lineup, M&M'S has made other changes to the 82-year-old brand in recent months, including giving its six characters new *shoes* in an attempt to modernize the candies. Green has swapped go-go boots for sneakers. Brown is sporting lower, more sensible heels. Red's and Yellow's shoes now have laces. Orange's shoe laces are no longer untied. And Blue's shoes, while little changed, resemble "a bad version of Uggs."

IX.

In an opinion piece, the Washington Post declared, "The M&M's changes aren't progressive. Give Green her boots back." Rolling Stone described the change as "nothing more than tectonic." Thousands have signed a petition to "keep the green M&M sexy." Huh?!? Apparently my favorite candy is not only controversial, but now "woke" besides; who knew?

Believe it or not, following this breadcrumb trail of peanut M&Ms leads us right to the doorstep of today's scripture reading, Isaiah 49:1-7; which is sometimes subtitled by scholars, "The Servant's Mission." Called by God before he was born, Isaiah begins the passage lamenting his ineffectiveness and the futility of his endeavors. Though gifted, prized and protected by God, Isaiah cannot help but conclude that his best efforts to turn Israel and the

ancestors of Jacob back to God have come to nothing; all has been an exercise in vanity.

X.

Whoa, whoa, whoa! says God: “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.” Here, again, is a reminder of what we talked about in last week’s sermon: God works on an infinitely larger scale than we do, and is always playing the long game.

In today’s passage, Isaiah is judging himself on the “measurables”; those things that *he* can see and identify as progress or accomplishment in returning his people to God. This, in the same way we might gauge our church based on resurrecting a Youth Group or not. In either instance, however, God says it is *too light* a thing. The Hebrew word used is *qalal* (kaw-lal’) meaning slight or trivial. That which for which God is striving, and we should be as well, is *much* more; deeper, richer and utterly pervasive.

XI.

Instead, God tells Isaiah he is being called to be a light to (*all*) the nations so that God’s salvation may reach the (very) ends of the earth. Though translated as the same word in English, the Hebrew word used is *or* (ore); meaning light, in a literal sense, as from heavenly bodies (sun, moon, stars). That for which *we* should be striving is not the strength, will and commitment to lift a heavier load but, rather, to shine a brighter light.

Admittedly, there are a great many structural and programmatic pieces, like a Youth Group, we will need to put together and have in place in order to usher in whatever next, new version of this church we will become. That said, the *best* way to do that (or *only* way, I would argue) is for us to get to know each other by utilizing opportunities to put ourselves in a place and space where we can simply have and enjoy conversation with one another. Simply stated, we need to keep company with ourselves.

XII.

Be warned, though, my brothers and sisters as the serpent slithers in the garden looking to tempt, distract, divide and stifle us in order to prevent these conversations from taking place; a crafty creature which can manifest in a multifold of forms, even a *Purple M&M*. We hear the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and understand the Original Sin to be that of disobedience when, in truth, it is division and separation.

We humans have always been intent on separating ourselves from God; and, when we tire of that, we divide ourselves one from another. Moreover, we've become *extremely* adept at doing so; even the slightest, most trivial matters are cause enough to estrange us and turn us against each other. While most sensible people may rightly recognize that kicking up a fuss about the color of an M&M is too light a thing, we must acknowledge far too many people still see the color of one's skin to be enough to divide us one from another; and, thereby, separate us from our God.

XIII.

It has been 60 years since these words were first spoken from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. They certainly bear repeating here from the steps of our sanctuary's chancel as, sadly, too many have heard but are still not listening.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

On this Martin Luther King weekend, let us remember how important it is for us to be *having* conversations with one another, and to simply be able to *talk* to each other. In so doing, we will shine a brighter light to all the nations, but particularly our *own*, that God's salvation may reach to the (very) end of the earth. Amen.