

Isaiah 49:1-7

1 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. 2 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. 3 And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." 4 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." 5 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— 6 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." 7 Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, "Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

It's not an easy thing to vote in the state of Alabama. When we first moved here, Sam and I went to get our drivers licenses—a requirement to vote, as well as to drive. It took us three tries—the first time, because they told us they were only taking cash that day, the second time, we were told it was too late in the day for them to fit us in—it was one o'clock, they close at four; the third time, success! I thought: what if I didn't have a car and had to figure out a way to get there each time? What if I worked an hourly job and had to take time off? What if I had small kids in tow? Not easy.

The first election we voted in was a school funding issue. We and our children all went to public schools, my mom was a public school teacher, I served on a public

school board—I've never voted down a school funding issue, but we were going to be out of town. So we decided to vote absentee. First, I had to call and ask for an application to vote absentee. I had to send back the application with a copy of my drivers license (what if we didn't have easy access to a copier?); for the actual ballot, we had to get two witnesses or a notary public to sign—something I'd never experienced anywhere else. Since I work close to City Hall, I decided to hand-deliver both ballots. So I walked them over there, only to be told that I could hand deliver mine, but not my husband's—even though it was fully-affidavited on the exterior envelope. So I had to take his to the post office and pay the dollar-whatever so that a postal carrier—who is also not my husband—could deliver it.

Our takeaway from both experiences is that the State of Alabama does not want its citizens to vote.

We've now had the first two Wednesday-evening gatherings to study “The 1619 Project,” a collection of articles published in *The New York Times Magazine* that trace how the institution of slavery continues to shape pretty much every aspect of American society today.

The first article, by Nikole Hannah-Jones, highlights the enormous political gains of African Americans during Reconstruction. This was a period of only twelve years—1865-1877, during which many formerly-enslaved men were elected to

local, state, and federal office from states all over the South, including sixteen black men who were elected to Congress, one of whom was elected as a United States Senator.¹

Nationally, this group of legislators helped to pass the 13th Amendment, which outlawed slavery; the Civil Rights Act of 1866, which “codified black American citizenship for the first time, prohibited housing discrimination and gave all Americans the right to buy and inherit property... the 14th Amendment, ensuring citizenship to any person born in the United States [and] ...guaranteeing equal protection under the law; [and]...the 15th Amendment, guaranteeing...the right to vote to all men regardless of ‘race, color, or previous condition of servitude.’”²

At the state level, Hannah-Jones writes, “These black officials joined with white Republicans, some of whom came down from the North, to write the most egalitarian state constitutions the South had ever seen. They helped pass more equitable tax legislation and laws that prohibited discrimination in public transportation, accommodation and housing. Perhaps their biggest achievement was the establishment of...the public school.”³

¹ Nikole Hannah-Jones, “The Idea of America,” in *The 1619 Project* (New York, NY: The New York Times Magazine, August 18, 2019) p. 20.

² *Ibid*, p. 21

³ *Ibid.*, p. 21

That's right: before that point, there had been no free, public education in the South. Now, education was available to everyone, including poor whites and newly-freed blacks.

And all of this was accomplished in a twelve-year period. Three Constitutional Amendments, a Civil Rights Act, brand-new state constitutions, and the establishment of public education in the South. Can we resurrect these people and put them back in office?

But then, abruptly, it was over. Hannah-Jones writes, "In 1877, President Rutherford B. Hayes, in order to secure a compromise with Southern Democrats that would grant him the presidency in a contested election, agreed to pull federal troops from the South. With the troops gone, white Southerners quickly went about eradicating the gains of Reconstruction."⁴ This set off a backlash against African Americans so brutal that they called it "the second slavery." The gains for which they had worked were snatched away—at least, from them.

Hannah-Jones, again: "Thanks in significant part to the progressive policies and laws black people had championed, [white Southerners] experienced substantial improvement in their lives even as they forced black Americans back into quasi

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21

slavery. As Waters McIntosh, who had been enslaved in South Carolina, lamented, ‘It was the poor white man who was freed by the war, not the Negroes.’⁵

What must that have felt like: to struggle nearly 250 years to gain your freedom, then to taste that freedom and begin to shape your own destiny, and then to have it all taken away, while others continued to enjoy the fruits of your labors? Why would you even continue to try after that? Why continue to carry the burden of hope when history is so fickle?

That must have been something of what the writer of Isaiah was feeling when he spoke the words recorded in today’s reading. “I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.” The people of Israel knew what it was to strive, and gain, and then lose it all. Through a series of kings, most notably David, they had built a kingdom—but they were only independent for a time. Soon, they found themselves under the threat or under the thumb of a series of foreign powers— Assyria, Egypt, Persia, Babylon—each of which vied back and forth for control of the region of Palestine. Sometimes the Israelites cooperated with the superpower of the moment. Sometimes they resisted. Sometimes they even succeeded in throwing them out—only to have those foreign armies march back in with a vengeance. Again and again, leaders were hauled off into exile, puppet

⁵ Ibid., p. 21

rulers were put in their place, and the people were taxed into bare survival mode. The final straw was in 587 B.C.E., when the Babylonians stormed back in on a wave of destruction, burned and smashed the Temple to the ground, and took the leaders into an exile that lasted a generation.

Isaiah speaks at the end of that exile, as the people finally face the prospect of return—but what they will be returning to is no longer the nation that their forebears built, but a wasteland. Think, “Mad Max, Thunderdome.” Talk about your fixer-upper!

“I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.” But then, Isaiah adds: “yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God.” The faith that had helped the Israelites survive the exile was still intact, pushing back against their sense of futility. “Yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God.”

On this weekend before Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, as we look at the state of this nation, we can certainly echo Isaiah’s sentiment: “I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.” Of course, much of the labor and sacrifice wasn’t even ours. Generations of black Americans suffered. Generations of black Americans and some white Americans labored and died to gain rights that

were then clawed back from them. Even as we speak, new barriers are being erected to block the most basic right of citizenship: the right to vote.

And the public schools for which we can thank those visionaries of Reconstruction have become bastions of inequality, with radically different qualities of education depending on your income level, skin color, and place of residence.

In the light of those losses, it's hard to feel inspired to take up the banner of change. But not doing so dishonors the memory of those who went before us, and sacrifices the future of those who come after us. Ultimately, that's who it's about: not ourselves. Certainly, that's the message that God gives to Isaiah.

I have to say, that message kind of amuses me. Isaiah, speaking as the suffering people of Israel, declares a sense of failure and helplessness, but holds onto the faith that God will vindicate them. God's response isn't to swoop in with relief, but to up the ante: "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."

Wow. What they hadn't been able to manage for themselves, God now expected them to do for everyone. Gee, thanks, God?

And yet, it has always been in God's nature to ensure that blessings not be hoarded, but shared. And it seems to be in human nature to work longer and harder and more sacrificially when there is more than our own good at stake. And when we see that divine nature and that human nature embodied, together, in Jesus, it results in a mission so life-giving and so compelling that ordinary fishers, vulnerable widows, and jaded tax-collectors leave their own security and best interests behind to seek the salvation of the world. "Where are you staying?" John's disciples ask Jesus in our Gospel reading. "Come and see," Jesus says. And not just see, but join in.

So here we are, at a precarious point in history in which the scales of justice could tip in pretty much any direction, and it may look like there's not much worth saving. Is this where we throw up our hands and admit defeat? That's a definite option—especially if we aren't among the segments of the population who are most threatened.

But if we do that, then we can't really call ourselves followers of Jesus, because we know where Jesus would be headed—straight into the fray. That's what it took for him to plant the seeds of salvation. That's what it took for those formerly-enslaved people to create a better South for everyone, white and black. That's what it took for Dr. King, Fred Shuttlesworth, and so many others who walked into the

wasteland that was the American system at the time and insisted on something better. We Americans of every color have a better life because of the work of black Americans and white allies during Reconstruction and during the Civil Rights Era, but the gains are always precarious. There are times when we may feel hopeless and overwhelmed—but we can't just give up and wring our hands, because ultimately, it isn't about us. It's about the people who are shut out of the system right now. It's about our children and grandchildren. It's about a world that watches to see whether we, as Christians, really follow Christ; and whether we, as Americans, really believe the words of freedom and equality that we like to spout.

"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."

Others have been that light for us. It's our calling to be that light for others—to make sure that, when the next generations look out at this nation and at our world, they don't see a wasteland of crushing inequality, but a place where hope has been rebuilt, and where all people can thrive.

