

A Limitless Arena

Isaiah 49:1-7 (NRSV)

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."

This second of Isaiah's Servant Songs reaffirms a major point from last week's first Servant Song: "The LORD called me before I was born..." A part of last week's sermon focused on the Spirit of the Lord that fell upon the Servant—the same spirit that brooded over the face of the waters at creation¹; and two weeks ago, the Scripture brought out that the grace God offers today was a part of the divine plan "before the foundations of the world." (Eph. 1:4). There never has been a time when Grace was not a part of God's nature and identity.

Today, the major theme; indeed, it is a major theme in all four Lectionary texts, is voiced in that same opening verse: "The LORD called me before I was born..."

Calling is never to a private piety. Isaiah anticipates not simply the restoration of Israel (after Babylonian exile); indeed, God's salvation is "to the end of the earth"—a limitless arena.

Shift now to the Epistle lesson for today. This is Paul's opening greeting to the church that was the greatest pain in the neck for him; and yet, which may have been his favorite:

I CORINTHIANS 1:1-2 (NRSV) *Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, ²To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours...*

Calling belongs not only to what we might term "professional church leaders;" not just "prophets" and "apostles"; indeed, here Paul speaks of Christians in Corinth as those who are "called to be saints"... (define saints).

As I continued to read this text from I Corinthians, I stumbled onto something that grabbed my attention. As Paul uses two terms to describe our calling:

I CORINTHIANS 1:9 (NRSV) *God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

As I frequently do, I read the text in several English versions. Here is that same verse in the New Living Translation:

I CORINTHIANS 1:9 (NLT) *(God) is faithful to do what he says, and he has invited you into partnership with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Now, I'm walking a thin line, using the New Living Translation; because it is one of only five English versions that render that verse, "...*he has invited you into partnership with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*" In the original language the word is *κοινωνία*, which usually is translated, "fellowship;" in fact, 42 English versions say, "...*he has invited you into fellowship with his Son...*"

The word literally means, "common"—as in common property, or common work. It is the basis of English words, like "community" and "communion." The

¹ (Isaiah 42:5-6, reflecting Genesis 1:2)

Amplified New Testament uses two words: "companionship and participation;" while the Easy to Read Version says, "(God) has chosen you to share life with His Son..."

I think the word, "partnership", captures all the above.

The other word that grabs my attention is "invited"; "...*he has invited you into partnership...* In the original language. It is the same word used in...

- Galatians 5:13: "...you were called into liberty..."
- Ephesians 4:1: "I ... urge you to live a life worthy of your calling."
- Colossians 3:15: "And may the peace of Christ reign in your hearts, because it is for this that you were called together as parts of one body."

And in its noun form, "ἐκκλησία," literally means, "those who are called," but in the NLT sense, "those who are invited." It most often is translated, "church." It is totally within Scriptural integrity to say that we have been called into partnership with Christ, and that that constitutes a valid definition of "church membership."

This is a "hard sell" in a consumerist culture whose mantra is "the customer is always right." The world defines "membership" as "paying your dues and getting your benefits." The New Testament defines membership in the Church as "being called into partnership with Christ." The world talks about "having" a church; the New Testament talks about "being" the church.

From the greatest figures in the history of Israel and the church, to the most anonymous person on the back pew of some tiny congregation in the remotest part of Appalachia, all God's servants have their roles defined by God's calling.

The calling of God is unique for each person. Some are dramatic: Peter Marshall, Saul of Tarsus, convicted Watergate felon, Chuck Colson. We can get so distracted by the wide-screen, Technicolor, stereophonic sound stories of God's call that we completely miss the "still small voice" God uses to call most of us.

The prophets, Jeremiah and Isaiah, and St. Paul (among others) say God called them "from their mothers' wombs." In a sense God's call is imbedded in our DNA—not so much an "event" as it is part of our identity as beings created in the image of God. It's a kind of "Calling by Self-Discovery"; and some of us just kinda "grow into it" by paying attention to the things we love to do, the things that bring us a sense of fulfillment and the things that other people affirm in us.

But, some of us are less self-aware, so it takes something a bit more theatrical to get our attention. If you're like me, it may take a 2X4 upside the head; and some folks go through life blissfully oblivious to their calling. But all of us are called. Every life has divine meaning and purpose, and those who discover it rarely demonstrate symptoms of depression or aimlessness or emptiness.

So, the ways God calls his servants may vary greatly, but the call is never to a merely private faith or piety: we're not alone. Isaiah's call was not simply to restore Israel, but to extend God's salvation to the "all peoples of the earth." In the opening lines of the Corinthian letter, when Paul says "you are called," the "you" is plural—it's "y'all are called!" It's not enough for us to cherish only a private faith. Our fellowship with one another and our witness to the world, if faithful, will reflect the partnership with Christ into which God has called us collectively.

Partnership. Here's the IRS definition: "*the relationship existing between two or more persons who join to carry on a trade or business. Each person contributes money, property, labor or skill, and expects to share in the profits and losses of the business.*"

Wikipedia defines it as "*an arrangement in which parties agree to cooperate to advance their mutual interests.*"

But I find no better definition of the partnership into which we are called than this beautiful summation in **EPHESIANS 4:15-16**: "*...speaking the truth in love, we will grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.*"

Let's consider one more New Testament image of partnership: the church is the bride of Christ. The traditional marriage vow is a promise to love and to cherish... "in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, for better or for worse." Remaining faithful only as long as we agree with each other does not fit any definition of partnership—or unity. The good news is that our partnership is not dependent upon any of us being right, nor upon any of us being in agreement on any specific issue. "*God will keep us strong to the end, for he is faithful to do what he says, and he has called us into partnership with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*"