



“TAKE AWAY”
SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 49: 1-7; JOHN 1:29-42
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
January 19, 2020
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Isaiah 49:1-7

49:1 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.

49:2 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.

49:3 And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

49:4 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."

49:5 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-

49:6 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."

49:7 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."

John 1:29-42

1:29 The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

1:30 This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'

1:31 I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel."

1:32 And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.

1:33 I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'

1:34 And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."

1:35 The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples,

1:36 and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!"

1:37 The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.

1:38 When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?"

1:39 He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon.

1:40 One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother.

1:41 He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed).

1:42 He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

Take Away #1: Jesus is not a con artist.

The way a con artist works is that they win your confidence, they win your trust, and then they use that confidence and trust to cheat, to steal, to take something away from you.

It really is an art form, and people who are good at it understand how people work, they understand what people want. Their identity as a con artist is only revealed when they don't deliver on their promises or when people start to realize they've been fooled.

John the Baptist gives Jesus a major boost with his own followers—this guy is the real deal, he tells them. I've seen it myself. If you trust me, you should trust him. And then he puts in a plug for what Jesus can do—he will take away the sin of the world.

It's not hard for Jesus skeptics to look around and say Jesus obviously didn't take away the sins of the world. And it can be pretty disheartening to see what's being done these days in Jesus' name.

But John the Baptist's words invite us to see Jesus for ourselves—to see what it is that he empowers in us.

Sin here does not refer to behaviors or acts, but to a condition of estrangement from God. When we are estranged from God, we are estranged from ourselves. When we are estranged from ourselves, we are estranged from each other. And this estrangement is formed and fed by a distorted way of seeing things. We see God as far away from us, instead of right here in our midst. And we lose touch with how we were created to see ourselves—as God's creation, as God's beloved creation.

Jesus takes away that condition—that distorted way of seeing God and of seeing ourselves. When we really see Jesus for who he is, then we can really see ourselves for who we are. Seeing Jesus is about seeing love—perfect love—the kind of love that is not afraid to suffer for its beloved, the kind of love that sees the beauty in every living thing, the kind of love that wants to be close, that wants us to be well.

Following Jesus is about seeking after the truth about ourselves—we are not estranged from God because God is angry with us, because God has receded from the world, but because we lost track of our true identity, because we lost track of who we belong to and how loved we are.

So much of our sin is in our self-loathing, our insecurity, our fear of losing the things that we think make us feel powerful.

Jesus takes away that delusion by seeing us so clearly—and asking us to see him clearly—the walking, talking, living, breathing proof that God wants us to be well. That's not a scam, that's a healing opportunity.

Take away #1: Jesus is not a con artist.

Take Away #2: God is not a nationalist.

The Prophet Isaiah has God's own voice making that crystal clear. God's suffering servant is not just here to transform Israel, but to transform all the nations, the whole world.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a pastor and professor in Germany during the rise of Adolph Hitler and the German Christian Church.

Hitler capitalized on the social capital of the church in Germany to fuel his lust for power. Hitler became the Chancellor of Germany only thanks to the urging of wealthy industrialists who urged President Hindenburg to appoint Hitler to that post to squash communism and control the labor unions.

Only weeks after Hitler became Chancellor he had a signed agreement from the Catholic church not to interfere with Hitler's policies in exchange for them not being attacked, and Hitler had appointed a Nazi official to the top religious post in the national Protestant church in Germany.

In short order, swastika paraments replaced Christian symbols in sanctuaries in Germany.

After President Hindenburg died, Hitler made himself both Chancellor and President, and donned the title Führer. All men in the armed services had to take a personal vow of allegiance to Hitler.

Just a few years later, in 1938 on Hitler's 50th birthday, all pastors were commanded to take a vow of allegiance to him.

Bonhoeffer wrote, preached, and taught about the dangers of nationalism and patriotism becoming conflated with God and faith. He became involved with the German intelligence agency's secret resistance movement and a plan to assassinate Hitler. Eventually he was arrested and executed for treason in 1945.

Bonhoeffer saw his country get swept up in a virulent nationalism fueled and fed by violence, terror, antisemitism, and the brutal treatment of the most vulnerable. He saw how distorted God had become by the religious of his country.

In one of his letters from Tegel prison he describes the only God who can help the world.

“God lets himself be pushed out of the world onto the cross. God is weak and powerless in the world and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which God is with us and helps us... Christ helps us not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering.”¹

Bonhoeffer was one of the earliest voices that spoke publicly against Hitler. Just two days after Hitler was made Chancellor, a radio address by Bonhoeffer that criticized a leader who makes an idol of himself was taken off the air mid address.

Bonhoeffer warned that when a government is used to oppress minorities it has ceased to be a legitimate government. And when the church ceases to be in solidarity with the oppressed, it has ceased to be the church.

The International Bonhoeffer Society came out this week with a strong statement recommending the removal of President Donald Trump from office based on the teachings of Bonhoeffer.

Their statement said:

“As grateful recipients, and now custodians, of the theological, ethical, and political legacy of the German pastor-theologian and Nazi resister Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we believe all persons of faith and conscience should prayerfully consider whether our democracy can endure a second term under the presidency of Donald Trump. We believe it cannot. In 2017, we issued a statement expressing our grave concerns about the rise in hateful rhetoric and violence, the rise in deep divisions and distrust in our country, and the weakening of respectful public discourse ushered in by the election of Donald Trump. We articulated the need for Christians to engage in honest and courageous theological reflection in the face of the threat posed by his leadership. Over the last three years, the need for such discernment has grown more urgent... One of the greatest lessons learned from the history of the Christian churches during Germany’s Third Reich is that it is crucial to respond to threats to human life, integrity, and community when they first appear, and to continue to challenge them.”²

Take away #2: God is not a nationalist.

Take Away #3: Following Jesus is dangerous.

Martin Luther King, Jr. called this country and the church to its better angels. While every year on this weekend white people like to quote Dr. King’s language about children being judged by the content of their character instead of the color of their skin, people like us are less comfortable with Dr. King’s call to white churches to stop being complicit with the systems that oppress people in America.

In his letter from the Birmingham Jail it is white progressive ministers that he specifically names for their disappointing call for him to slow down, to stop applying so much societal pressure for change, to cease the direct actions that raised the ire of white America.

King lamented how the church had lost touch with its radical roots—with its identity as a change agent, a transforming force in society. The early movements of Jesus followers were seen as “disturbers of the peace,” as “outside agitators.” They

were not cozy with the powers that be, but they cleaved to God and were happy to suffer for what they believed.

“Things are different now,” King wrote.

“The contemporary church is often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church’s silent and often vocal sanction of things as they are.... Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world?”³

King laments:

“I had hoped the white moderate would see this. Maybe I was too optimistic. Maybe I expected too much. I guess I should have realized that few members of a race that has oppressed another race can understand or appreciate the deep groans and passionate yearnings of those that have been oppressed and still fewer have the vision to see that injustices must be rooted out by strong, persistent, and determined action.”⁴

King’s writing and preaching and teaching and social action became more convicting of people like us as the Civil Rights Movement grew. In fact, the powers that be became more and more concerned about him as he spoke more pointedly about the American economy and the limitations of capitalism for a just distribution of resources.

His “Poor People’s Campaign” was the next step for the Civil Rights Movement because he believed that without economic justice there could be no peace, and that racism was being used as a tool to separate people who were being disadvantaged by systems built to maintain the concentration of wealth among a few.

His assassination came as his message became more tied to the prophetic teachings of Jesus.

Take away #3: Following Jesus is dangerous

(Go to the Table)

Jesus takes away the sin of the world—the condition that distorts our self-understanding, the condition that distorts our relationships with each other, the condition that tells us lies about who we are and what we are here for in this world.

It's time for us to recommit to the way His love changes us—the world needs us to see Him and to see ourselves truthfully and courageously.

These are trying times, Grace Covenant. Christianity is being used to prop up the status quo. Jesus is being used to prop up lies, oppression, and violence. God is being used to prop up a way of life that is destroying the world and the relationships with which we have been entrusted.

I know all of us have a lot of things going on in our lives, that make us feel like we don't have the emotional bandwidth to face these harsh realities. That's part of how oppressive systems become so tenacious, people like us are comfortable enough, even if disturbed, not to push for change too hard. White supremacy culture socializes all of us to feel fragile and reactive when we are asked to look at these realities head on.

I know that there are a few, and I know it is just a few, of you who are tired of talking about white supremacy and the church's complicity in oppressive systems and our need to step up our game as followers of Jesus. I know this work that we are doing as a faith community is hard work.

But there is no evidence anywhere in our faith tradition that following Jesus is supposed to be easy, or that following Jesus is about ignoring the pain of the world or lying to ourselves about how we need to change.

Whatever it is that is making some of us tired or making some of us hesitant needs to be healed, needs to be transformed. Our faith demands it. And healing and transformation is what this Table is in our faith tradition.

We are coming together here to this Table more often because we need to be here together more often.

We need to practice Eucharist enough times that it starts to sink in—we are being called to be the Body of Christ in the world and we are called to be grateful for the liberating truth of that purpose that we have.

We are the Body of Christ, and Christ didn't coddle the powerful. Christ didn't reject or ignore the oppressed. And Christ didn't stop following God's lead when it got hard, or when he got tired, or even when his life was at stake.

We come here broken, we come here afraid, we come here bewildered, tired, and maybe even angry.

We also come here hungry for a different world—for a world where people are not cruel in response to vulnerability, but compassionate with the same generosity that Christ shows us here.

This community of faith is not as strong and resilient and courageous as we are for nothing. God didn't make us this way for us to protect the status quo. God made us this way to help heal the world. And it starts with us believing God is healing us.

Come and see, come and taste and see—the joyful feast of the people of God—from the prophets and martyrs who risked everything for love, to the stragglers and betrayers who have let fear define us, to the wounded and the lonely who aren't sure how to trust that there is a place for us here—this is where we are fed for the life God calls us to live together—a life for and with each other.

Take away #4: The feast is ready and there is a place for you and me.

Thanks be to God.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, edited by Eberhard Bethge. (New York: MacMillan, 1953, 1967, 1971), 360-361.

² <https://sojo.net/articles/international-bonhoeffer-society-calls-ending-donald-trumps-presidency-statement-concern>

³ Martin Luther King, Jr. "A Letter from the Birmingham Jail."

⁴ Ibid.