

## What Are You Looking For? ... Come And See – Eric Nord

Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-11; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

A clear memory from my childhood occurred when I was about 9 or 10. One of us boys was having a birthday, and another family was coming for the party. However, we boys were not behaving; I don't recall the exact disobedience, but it frustrated my father to the point that he picked up the phone, dialed (this was obvious on a rotary phone) and we could clearly hear him cancelling the party. We were crestfallen and contrite, and he then revealed that he had kept a finger on the receiver, so the call hadn't gone through. But we had gotten the message loud and clear. Today's Old Testament reading makes me remember this story—the prophetic message begins with *Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away!*, but it seems the message is really not for *coastlands* and *peoples from far away!* The true intended recipient is probably the people of Israel. Perhaps they are intended to hear something in this message that perhaps they would not take seriously were it delivered in other ways?

Today's reading from Isaiah is clearly a prophetic message. This latter part of Isaiah was written to the exiles in Babylon. In the preceding chapter, God announces that he will save Israel, and later in this chapter, God announces the rebuilding of Jerusalem. But after seeing the “city of God” sacked, and decades in captivity, the people likely doubt that God will (or can!) save them. (Particularly given the dominant view in the Ancient Near East of gods being territorial, the idea that their god could save them even while they were in the land of another god may have seemed absurd.)

Just as the identity of the recipient is not straightforward, neither is that of the speaker.

The speaker is identified as *You are my servant, Israel...* (v. 3). But this is not, apparently, a reference to the whole people of Israel, since the servant's role is later described as (v. 6) *to raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore the survivors of Israel*.

It seems God has been trying to get a message through to someone who is losing hope: in v. 3, God says to the speaker, *You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified*, but the speaker replies (v. 4), *I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity*. The word translated as *nothing* in v. 4 is the same word translated as *formless* in the Genesis creation account—so *I have spent my strength for formless chaos*. In thinking about this kind of discouragement I find the Spanish term “*desanimación*” helpful; it more nearly translates as “de-souling”, and that is what profound discouragement feels like. This “de-souling” is severe enough that God's message about the identity and future of the hearer is being discounted (possibly even dismissed) on the basis of past and present experiences. I suspect that some of us may have found ourselves in the same position to some extent.

In spite of the hearer's attempted negation of the message, God ups the ante here. Contrast v. 4 (that we just discussed) with v. 6, *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...* The hearer's sense of the success of their work is not accurate—they say “I am (or we are) a failure”, but God replies, “The task I gave you was too small”. In spite of the

discouragement of the hearer, God says, *I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth*. There is work to do to communicate something about God to the broader world.

It may be worth noting that even in the midst of this profound discouragement (“All I have done is fail”), the hearer adds *yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward with my God*. Note also that the ultimate vindication and success is *because of the LORD, who is faithful, ... who has chosen you* (v. 7). The outcome rests not on our effort, or our success, but on the faithfulness of God.

Today’s epistle reading is from the introduction to 1 Corinthians. First of all, because we are English-speaking North Americans, we must remember that this is a letter written to a congregation—everywhere it says “you”, insert “y’all”, (“yinz” if you are from Pittsburgh, or “ustedes” para los hispano-hablantes). I want to re-read verses 4-7: *I give thanks to my God always for y’all because of the grace of God that has been given y’all in Christ Jesus, for in every way y’all have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among y’all so that y’all are not lacking in any spiritual gift as y’all wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ*.

The *speech and knowledge of every kind* is part of the way that this church has been *enriched in [Christ Jesus]*, and this is part of the way the *testimony of Christ* has been strengthened.

*So that y’all are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord...* This seems to imply that a lack of spiritual gifts may be due to a weakness of testimony.

But what does it mean *the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you*? Is this their testimony about Christ, or is it actually *the testimony of Christ*—the fruit of the work of the Spirit of Christ in the community? NIV translates this as *our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you*, while the Message says, *the evidence of Christ has been clearly verified in your lives*. The “Dios Habla Hoy” translation reads something like *now that the message about Christ has been firmly established among you*.

These last two readings actually seem to fit with the idea that *the testimony* will make possible the flourishing of spiritual gifts, because *the testimony*, the life of the Spirit in and among the community, creates these gifts.

But is there really a conflict between these different readings? Maybe not, because either way we understand it, the central thing is that Christ is proclaimed.

In today’s psalm, the psalmist begins by proclaiming the benefits of following God’s ways, and being true to God: *Happy are those who make the LORD their trust, who do not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after false gods* (v. 4). What does the psalmist do with this happiness? He proclaims it: *I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; see, I have not restrained my lips...I have not hidden your saving help within my heart, I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation; I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation*” (vss. 9-10).

At this point, it is becoming clear that there is a thread that runs through today's readings; it is "testifying" or *the testimony of Christ*. But as we just saw from the epistle, it may be hard to separate "testimony about Christ" from "testimony of Christ" (or "testimony about Christ from you" from "testimony of Christ in you").

Now we can turn to the Gospel reading. Here we see John the Baptizer proclaiming Jesus as *the Lamb of God*, and that he *saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove* to remain on Jesus. Here we see Jesus begin to gain disciples as some of the Baptizer's disciples abandon him. There are a couple of details in the text we should consider before returning to our theme.

First: why does John (either of them) use the term *the Lamb of God* here (vss. 29 & 36)? What did this mean—either to those who heard the Baptizer speak it, or those who first read John's Gospel?

Willard Swartley<sup>1</sup> notes that there are several possible ways to understand *Lamb of God*—as a reference to the Lamb of Revelation, as a reference to the animal sacrifices for the sin offerings, or as a reference to the Passover Lamb. Swartley concludes the Passover Lamb is the best understanding here. The sacrifices for sins require a goat, sheep, or bull, not a lamb. Also, John records the Baptizer's words as *who takes away the sin of the world*, not *the sins of the world*.

In Exodus, the Passover Lamb is not a sacrifice of atonement, a death that somehow allows God to forgive. No! It is a meal shared in anticipation (and then in remembrance) of the salvation God provides—both salvation (protection) from God's judgement on Egypt and salvation (deliverance) from captivity. In the Passover, God is killing the things that bind us; in the Passover we anticipate/acknowledge/remember that, and the blood of the Passover Lamb protects us from the judgement of God.

Second: the words "stay" and "remain" (vss. 32, 33, 38, 39) here are the same Greek word translated as "abide" when Jesus uses it in Ch. 15 (abiding in the vine). *And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abided on him. 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 abide is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God." The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "... Teacher, where are you abiding?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was abiding, and they abided with him that day...*

How does it change our understanding if we use the term "abide"? Does the idea of "following" here seem linked to the idea of "abiding"? Is our understanding of these images better if we recall that during the first Passover the people of Israel were instructed to mark the lintel and

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<sup>1</sup> Swartley, Willard. 2013. *John*. Believers Church Bible Commentary. Douglas B. Miller and Loren I. Johns, eds. Herald Press, Harrisonburg, VA.

doorposts of their home with the blood of the Passover Lamb, and then not leave the house? In a sense, they were “abiding in the shelter of the blood of the Passover Lamb.”

Returning to our emerging theme of testimony, the Baptizer states that he sees his role as *reveal[ing the Messiah] to Israel* (v. 31), and he repeats (v. 34) that he *see[s] and testifie[s]*. This idea seems to directly tie together all of today’s readings. But it is worth our noting, as a bunch of mostly rather comfortable North Americans, that the Baptizer’s testimony is costly to him—he loses followers (v. 37). Initially, the Baptizer is certain that this is part of the plan—in John 3 his followers ask him about the loss of disciples to Jesus and he replies, *He must increase and I must decrease*. But as Jesus’ ministry progresses, the Baptizer seems to have some doubts; the Synoptics portray the Baptizer as struggling somewhat with the way things are turning out. While in prison the Baptizer sends disciples to ask Jesus, *Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?* How does Jesus reply? *Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.* His reply is basically “report the testimony that you observe.”

I want to pause a moment to consider another question from the Gospel reading: why does Jesus rename Peter (v. 42)? It seems to be that Jesus is declaring a new identity for Peter. Jesus doesn’t do this for the other disciples. We can speculate that perhaps Peter somehow needed a new identity, that the identity he held for himself was not accurate, or perhaps hurtful. Maybe Jesus was preparing Peter for the aftermath of Peter’s eventual denial? We can’t know. But I think there is an important link to our reading from Isaiah, where the speaker (speaking perhaps on behalf of the exiles of Israel) rejects the first declaration of his (their) identity as *my servant...in whom I will be glorified*. God insists that, *I will give you as a light to the nations... Kings shall see and stand up...*

I think what is happening is that God tells his people who they are, and then God’s people declare to the world who God is – they testify. Our testimony comes about when we allow God to tell us who we are. I think this helps us navigate the interpretation of *testimony of Christ* that we looked at earlier. The testimony of Christ in us and our testimony about Christ are, I think two sides of the same coin, and I think that coin is the identity that Christ gives us. When the Baptizer’s disciples followed Jesus and asked, “Where do you abide?,” I think they were really asking, “Who are you?” And the way they really found out was when they let Jesus tell them who they were.

What are you looking for? ... Come and see.