

Sharp Words

By Rev. Jonathan A. Malone

*Preached at Lower Merion Baptist Church
Sunday, January 16, 2005; Bryn Mawr, PA*

Isaiah 49:1-7

“I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

Do you know what is annoying? Whining. You know what whining is, right – the weeping, moaning, wheezing, and crying “it’s not fair.” It is a key tactic of negotiation. Children are especially notorious for the gift of whining, but many adults have held onto that gift and continue to use it. In the novel, *Don Quixote* there are many occasions when Sancho Panza, the sidekick, is found whining because he was promised an island by Don Quixote, and claims that it isn’t fair for him to suffer and not get his deserved island. He whines so much that at times he is seen as a sniveling fool, desiring his own treasures, concerned with his own self, instead of a great and loyal friend. We all encounter whining with our children, with our friends, and even our leaders. It is one of the great methods of persuasion that often works not because we deserve the treatment, but only because others do not want persevere through the annoying cries and whines.

One of the great characteristics of the Israelites is whining. “We don’t have enough water... we don’t have anything to eat... our home has been destroyed... the Egyptians are mean...our God is too vague and unknowable...”and on and on. Do you remember after the Hebrews finally got out of Egypt, and they found themselves in the wilderness? They wanted to be liberated, and God liberated them. They were hungry, and God gave them food. Yet then they whined that the food didn’t taste good, that life was better in Egypt because at least there they were able to eat well. So quickly they forgot the sting of the whip. Even in the passage read today we hear the whining of the prophet, “I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity....” In the passage for today, the people are moaning because they have been taken to Babylon, and then have been forced into exile, and they are still in exile despite all the prayers, rituals, and liturgical dances performed. The prophet is moaning with the people, “I have spoken your word, Lord, I have done all that I can, and still we are in this abject situation. Why can’t you help us, Lord?” They are moaning and groaning because life is not right, things could be better, and it seems to them that God has left and forgotten them. So the Israelites do what all people do best. They whine, weep, moan and groan.

Don’t we join them with our own moaning and groaning? Don’t we join them with our own whining? We whine about the weather, we whine about how much we own, or how little. We whine about tax incentives, and tax reductions. It is a non-partisan act; the act of whining, in which peoples from all walks of life can take part.

Yet are there not complaints, which are merited? Do we not all have real problems, which cause us to worry? Look at your anxiety, where does that come from? Anxiety does not come from a place where whining emerges, but from a place where petitions, and desires are true and necessary. We have our struggles, we have our complications, and we have life difficulties that we all face. Money, family, health, security are those things which drive us to partake in our Hobbesian social contract. These are all concerns, which point to life, death and survival. They call into question our own existence, or as Paul Tillich points out, our anxiety leads us to questions why it is we exist, and how we can make our existence meaningful. Erik Erikson claims that anxiety is greatest in adolescence, and Herman Feifel finds it palpable in the later years of adulthood. Regardless, when we face our real concerns, those which threaten our lives and livelihood, making ends meet, staying healthy, taking care of our loved ones, questions and anxiety loom, almost suffocating us where we stand.

And almost always, when we are faced with life/death issues we then worry about salvation. We worry that we may not be good enough, we worry that we don’t do enough, we worry that we deserve the plight that we are now in, that we are mired in sin, and that we aren’t worthy of our Lord’s love. “What

have I done?” “I must have done something, so I must not be worthy of the good life.” A dangerous myth of the Protestant ethic is that we get what we deserve, and so we cry: *Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea summa culpa* we cry and moan. “I’m not worthy, Lord,” we say as we face our own dooming reality. I’m not worthy Lord, we say, as we fall again and again. I’m not worthy, Lord, we say, as we cry out in our desperate situation. There are things that are worth moaning and groaning about, there are valid concerns in all of our lives. And I imagine the Israelites were suffering similar concerns. I imagine that behind the whining we find that they were anxious about their existence. A prophet crying over his failure, questioning his calling, a people questioning their identity, a community wondering if they will be allowed to live the next day; yet there are times when our complaints are merited.

So what do we do, and how do we respond?

Come into the church and know that God loves you. Know that God does not leave us or punish us because of our humanity. We cannot change our lives, we cannot change our state, we cannot change who we are, but God can and does through the sacrifice and grace of Jesus Christ. So we are invited, we are called, and we are urged to come to the church, experience the grace and peace that God has to offer. Come to the church and know that whatever it is that you have done, God forgives you and loves you. Accept Christ into your heart and realize that you are accepted and loved no matter who you are or where you come from, and what you may have done in the past. For as like God did not leave Israel, God does not leave the church or the people in it, we turn from God, and are invited to turn back into the Lord’s loving embrace. And that embrace is felt in the community of the church. It is through the church that God’s grace is known, and in the church that God’s grace is received. This grace is experienced when you enter into the space of worship and know that you will be accepted no matter what. The grace is experienced when others give so much of themselves to you because you are part of the community and a child of God. So we enter through the doors, we become part of the community, and we ask Christ to enter into our lives. Christ will take you through to the light, Christ will gather us all, and Christ will offer us salvation.

With that salvation comes a knowing that there is a purpose for your being here, and that God made you special. With that salvation is realizing that God is with you in the highest peaks and the lowest valleys. With that salvation is realizing that forgiveness and acceptance is offered to you through the loving embrace of Christ welcoming you home. Accept that salvation, accept that grace, know that you are loved and forgiven, and then share that grace, and love all those who are looking for a place in this community. We are called to take care of each other, to welcome, and share the love of God with others. Grace is known and grace is shared in the church through us and by us. Have you ever been watching a football game, and seen one of the players get hurt? If the injury is serious, more often than not, the players from both teams gather together and pray. In that gathering, with the two or three on bended knees in the name of Christ, the church is present, and grace is shared and experienced. That is what we are to be for each other, sharing and experiencing God’s grace. Do you hear Christ calling you: come into my house, come into my safety, and come into my kingdom. You are brought out of exile and into the Promised Land and the church is the medium through which you are brought. God does not leave us, but saves us each and every day.

And as we take care of each other, ask for and offer help, this church will strengthen and grow.

Yet, we cannot stop there. Do you hear what God says to Israel- it is too light of a thing for just you yourself to be saved. It is too easy to navel gaze. No, we are now called to look around us, at the nations, the people who are also moaning, groaning, and weeping, and to reach out to them. Look at those who also have reason to moan and groan. Not the whiners, not the Red Sox (pre World Series) or Eagles fans looking for their special, magical rings. Look at those who are in real need, those who are facing true anxiety. Every day, millions of people are dying of starvation. Every day, hundreds of thousands of children go to sleep with no roof over their head, no place to call home. Every day, hundreds of thousands of women are abused by their partners in their own home. Every day, thousands of people are treated with injustice because of aspects of their lives they can’t control, because of who they are, and every day thousands of people work long hours in abject conditions for pennies an hour with no way to voice their plight. Every day injustice, exile and rejection are thrust upon God’s children by God’s children. Add to that those who are wandering, aimless, lost, and alone – not knowing the love of God. Oh the reason to cry! Oh the reason to weep! Oh the reason to look for and desire a light of hope in a dark, exiled world.

But we can barely take care of ourselves; we hardly have the resources to help our own community. These are our words and the words of the prophet, and God responds: It is too light a thing

for us to be an insulated community, keeping God's love for ourselves. It is too light a thing for us to be a separate people not sharing the grace and hope that God offers. No, we are to be a light to all around us. We are to be hope to all around us, and we are to be the servant, the witness, and the prophet to all around us. We cannot stop with ourselves, but must and will find a way to open our doors so wide that the entire world may know the love and forgiveness that God offers. And then we cannot sit and wait for them to come. No, we must go out and find them. This is the task, which God appoints to us; it is the task, which we must take.

To a community short on resources – to a community struggling to survive, God gives us the gift of speech; God gives us our words.

Our sharp words, our words of power, condemnation and love will come out of the shadows to confront powers of oppression and despair. We must be careful not to misunderstand what the “sword” of the prophet is. It is not an actual weapon of destruction. Nor is it a way that God's wrath is known and experienced. No, the toys of war and destruction are not the instruments of God's proclamation. The sticks of humanity which cause pain and suffering are not the tools through which God's love will be known. The sword is the prophetic word – and it is through the word, which our demand for justice and our proclamation for love will be known. Sharp words, speaking truth to power will cause unrest and unease. Sharp words speaking honestly to the principalities will cause discomfort. Sharp words speaking the power of God's love for the least, the downtrodden, the rejected, and the lost will offer hope in the greatest darkness. It is words, which we have in abundance, and words we will use to proclaim God's grace.

Tomorrow is Martin Luther King, Jr. day. Tomorrow we remember a suffering servant for the Lord. A person who was called to be a pastor, who wanted to serve his flock, who wanted to offer the peace, the healing, and the consolation that a broken people so desperately needed to hear. Yet it was too light a thing for King to serve only his church. It was too light a thing for King to serve only one church. No, he was given sharp words of truth, of power, of grace, acceptance, and of love. And his church followed. And the movement followed. And we witnessed Christianity changing the nation, affecting the world, being a light to all those around.

Do you see? Do you see what it is that we are called to do? We are also called to do the same, to go into the world and speak the sharp words of love to those who need to hear it. Who are those who need love? The single mother. The isolated father. The neglected child. The individual rejected by society. The hopeless and suffering individual who is surrounded by clouds and despair. We are to offer them the prophetic words of God's uncompromising, unrelenting, non-judging love.

We are called to go into the world and speak the sharp words of hope to those who need to hear it. Who are those who need to hear it? The victims of disaster in California. The victims of disaster in Southeast Asia. The victims of disaster in all parts of the world who are crying out “why?” We will go to them with our resources, with our prayers, with whatever we have and say, “we don't know, but have hope... you will not be left alone, you will not be forgotten, but we will help you return to your life.

We are called to go into the world and speak the sharp words of justice to those who need to hear it. Who are those who need to hear it? Those who take freedoms away from individuals. Those who exploit the labor, work, and needs of others. Those who are violent or cause violence to happen. Those who promote evil in whatever way. We will go to them with God's burning desire for justice and mercy and declare that they have turned from God. We will be the prophets for the people, calling all those with power to turn towards God and accept God's love.

We are called to speak the sharp words of grace for all those who need it. Who are those who need to hear it? Those who do not yet know that they are forgiven for all their sins. Those who have not yet accepted Christ as Lord and Savior. Those who are looking for a place to know and experience the accepting grace that God has to offer. We will go to them with peace, and love, and acceptance and invite them into our family, invite them to our worship, invite them to be a part of this gathered people. We will lead them all the way to the baptismal waters, and rejoice with them as they rise, cleansed, made new, and ready to be a part of this Christian movement.

Today God gives us a word of hope. Yes, we have been weeping, but the time for tears has ended, for God will restore us. Yes, we have been lost, but now God has found us. God has called us out of exile, God has called us to comfort each other, love each other, and care for each other. Then we will be a community, a church, and God's people in the fullest capacity that we can be.

But it is too light a thing to keep our eyes on each other, it is too light a thing to make a circle and

look inward. No, we must turn around and look out. We must look to the world, reach out and offer God's message. Christ died for each of you, Christ died for the world, and we are called to proclaim the sharp words of hope concerning Christ's death and resurrection; Words, which cut through the darkness of the world allowing the light of God to shine.

So, as a church, let us reach out to the world. Let us name those who need to hear and experience God's grace and speak it to them. Let us go and bring those in who are crying for God's love. Are you ready to join me in this task that God sets before us? Are you ready to invite others to join the Christian movement? It is too light a thing for us to stay complacent. It is too light a thing for us to stay concerned with ourselves. Let us go into the world, be a light to the nations, and call people to the grace that God offers.

AMEN