

## Isaiah 49

Listen to me, coastlands;  
pay attention, peoples far away.  
The Lord called me before my birth,  
called my name when I was in my mother's womb.  
<sup>2</sup> He made my mouth like a sharp sword,  
and hid me in the shadow of God's own hand.  
He made me a sharpened arrow,  
and concealed me in God's quiver,  
<sup>3</sup> saying to me, "You are my servant,  
Israel, in whom I show my glory."  
<sup>4</sup> But I said, "I have wearied myself in vain.  
I have used up my strength for nothing."  
Nevertheless, the Lord will grant me justice;  
my reward is with my God.  
<sup>5</sup> And now the Lord has decided—  
the one who formed me from the womb as his servant—  
to restore Jacob to God,  
so that Israel might return to him.  
Moreover, I'm honored in the Lord's eyes;  
my God has become my strength.  
<sup>6</sup> He said: It is not enough, since you are my servant,  
to raise up the tribes of Jacob  
and to bring back the survivors of Israel.  
Hence, I will also appoint you as light to the nations  
so that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.  
<sup>7</sup> The Lord, redeemer of Israel and its holy one,  
says to one despised,  
rejected by nations,  
to the slave of rulers:  
Kings will see and stand up;  
commanders will bow down  
on account of the Lord, who is faithful,  
the holy one of Israel,  
who has chosen you.

## **Sermon**

May the words of my mouth and meditations of my heart be pleasing to you O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Who knows what the word dissonance means? It's a musical term that describes the middle ground between harmony and chaos. Dissonance isn't disharmony, but it's intentional. It's meant to be there, perhaps to unsettle the listener or to alert them that change is coming. Dissonance also regularly appears in Scripture and in Lutheran theology, though we Lutherans tend to use the phrase tension more than dissonance. Perhaps we're just too intense. We say that we're a people that live in the tension. We're not sinners or saints. We're sinners and saints. Scripture isn't all Law or all Gospel, but full of Law and Gospel. These tensions, these dissonances, are common to our expressions of faith and our theology.

Isaiah's prophecy, then, should not surprise us. God's word promises glory, promises restoration, promises justice, promises honor. And yet we hear God's word also comes as sharp as a sword and from a seemingly hidden place. From the shadows, the word of God surprises us with a dissonance of pain and hope. Why, we might wonder, is this? All things truly beautiful bring an experience of pain and hope.

Think to the birth of a child. It's a beautiful moment of pain for a mother. The process of creating art brings with it the pain of failure as you learn to fashion beauty through trial and error. This is particularly true in experiences of empathy. Now, empathy is different from sympathy, for sympathy is feeling bad for someone. It's feeling your own feelings. Empathy is feeling like that someone, actually sharing their suffering. You feel what the other feels. This is why some say that true empathy is impossible, because I can't fully experience the world the way that you do.

However, the more we share with one another, the more beauty we discover. This painful, hopeful beauty is something that God knows and God invites us to know as well. That's where empathy grows among us.

This experience of pain and hope is magnified exponentially when we encounter God in Christ because only through God can we truly discover empathy with one another. Think back to the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve hear the results of their sin. Adam will suffer great trouble bearing fruit from the field and Eve will suffer great pain bearing children. We think of these as punishment, but in fact, they're an invitation to empathy. God's invited humanity to discover how painful it is to give life to something, and yet, how beautifully rewarding it is. That's certainly God's experience with humanity, for even as we bear God's image we break God's heart through disobedience. Surely as God's children we're called to lives

of beauty, which means that there will be experiences of pain and of hope. There's a dissonance even within our own being, and through that, we come to know the tension with which God creates the universe.

So, what do we do with this information? How do we live? **We dive into the hope of God's promises and don't let potential for pain deter us from our purpose.** I recently read that there's powerful health effects for cold water therapy. This is why some people start the day bathing or swimming in cold water, even to the point of those incredibly committed crews of Polar Bear swimmers who dive in to the water despite the frigid temperatures. Cold of this magnitude is painful. It hurts. The shock of your body's 98 degree equilibrium being plunged as much as fifty degrees. But the rush, the exhilaration of this kind of event, is only the beginning. Increased metabolism. Enhanced immunity. Lessen the effects of depression. Stabilized blood pressure.

Even increased pain tolerance in other areas of life. If you dive in to the water, no matter how cold, that pain is literally something that won't kill you, but instead, make you stronger.

The same is true of our faith, because that's what we find with the pain and hope we experience as God's people. The associated pain is the pain that comes with growth, with wholeness, with healing. **That's why we dive into the hope of God's promises and don't let potential for pain deter us from our purpose**, because we trust that pain serves God's intent for life.

Every experience I've had with tattoos and body piercings have been this way. The initial pain of the wound was for a purpose, and the more problematic pain was always the pain of healing. The earlobe that requires constant disinfectant. The subdermal itch deep beneath the new image on your arm. Those things, even while

distressing, serve a greater purpose. Even more so, then, we dive into the hope of God's promises and don't let potential for pain deter us from our purpose because we can trust God intends life, God intends wholeness, God intends beauty.

Now, there's some necessary wisdom with this process. You don't stay in cold water forever, because hypothermia is a real thing. Not all pain is divinely ordained. The pain that's caused by racism and hatred, by homophobia and pride, by cancer and by divorce, by violence and rage, all these pains born only of sin, God doesn't intend those things for our lives. God grieves alongside us at these unnecessary pains. , and here's the truly divine part, God's also faithful enough and compassionate enough to use even those things for our healing.

A couple of weeks ago I was honored to be invited to attend Radford High School's Sexuality and Gender

Acceptance Club, or SAGA. There I met a young person who's faced a slew of pain in their life. Not only does this teen constantly encounter the pain of negative judgement and misunderstanding as a transgender person; they've also developed cancer. But in our conversation, this person told me over and over again about the way they felt they were growing because of it, what they were learning from it, about how God was at work in the midst of it. Not that God forced this pain on them, but that God was at work, faithful to use even the negative pain brought by the prejudice of others and the awful aggression of cancer to bring growth and life amidst the pain. My jaw hit the floor at the strength of faith, the courage and the fight in this teenager. The dissonance in their life was palpable even to me, but they continue to dive into the hope of God's promises and they don't let presence of pain deter them from that purpose.

God didn't want those pains for this person, but is still faithful to use them for beauty in this teenager's life.

We dive in to the hope of God's promises with the wisdom that God offers to us, which assures us that the pain we encounter won't last forever. In the face of the weariness and the sharpness that we face, even that comes from our own selves, we know that what's laid before us is God's good will, something that always bears life. The dissonance that we face isn't a sign of chaos, but rather a reminder that harmony is coming. There will be resolution, so the dissonance isn't something to be feared.

In fact, at times, there can be joy in the dissonance. I'm not a frequent Polar Bear swimmer, but more than once in my life I've dove into water much too cold for recreational swimming. The first moment is shock, a resolute disbelief that something could be this cold and not yet frozen. The second moment, though, is invigoration. I'm more awake in

those moments than I've almost ever been. It's not comfortable, but the discomfort, the pain, reminds me that I'm alive and meant for life. Abundant life in Christ is not the opposite of pain, but the process of growth from it, of finding new life beyond even the struggles that, like the cross, seem only to lead to death.

All things truly beautiful bring an experience of pain and hope. God is truly beautiful. Life in Christ is truly beautiful. We come to know those things because God empathizes, God feels our pain and hope in Jesus, and God invites us, in Jesus, to see pain and hope like God does: with a purpose for abundant life. **This is why we dive into the hope of God's promises and don't let potential for pain deter us from our purpose.** We know that pain is not forever, and that the promise of God for a life worth living is worth our hope. The faith to which God invites us is a beautiful one, beautiful through the pain and beautiful buoyed by

hope, and always is directed at giving abundant life. Dive deep into that dissonance. There we find God conducting all creation toward harmony in Jesus Christ. Amen.