

**The Reverend Theo Robinson's Sermon for
January 18, 2026
Isaiah 49:1-7 – “The Servant Brings Salvation to All”**

O God, take our minds and think through them. Take our lips and speak through them. Take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.

Today we are blessed to read one a text that stands at the very heart of the Bible's central claim. As it says in Isaiah, the servant of God has been chosen, "chosen before I was born" (Is. 49:1), "so that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Is. 49:6).

For Christians, the servant is Jesus whose epiphany we remember and celebrate and now attempt to illuminate for our time. Why has Jesus come? It is amazing how many answers to that question we can find in Isaiah, a book written well before Jesus' time. God's servant has been called and named before birth, having been known even in the mother's womb (Is. 49:1). The first characteristic of the servant is that their "mouth" was made by God to be "a sharp sword" (Is. 49:2). It is important to note that this servant is decidedly not a warrior but an orator, whose words are sharp rather than whose iron sword is honed for battle. The book of Revelation borrows this image in John's description of "one like a son of humanity" from whose mouth comes a "sharp two-edged sword" (Rev. 1:16). Thus, very earliest Christianity focused on the power of Jesus found in his words, not in his prowess as soldier or fighter.

The identity of the servant for Isaiah is not Jesus, but the specific identity of the servant is less significant than the work of the servant. The chief task of the servant is to return the exiles to the Promised Land of God. Isaiah himself paints the famous pictures of Israel streaming back to Zion from the various places of their exile (go back and read Isaiah chapter 2 to see what I mean). When the exiles return to Jerusalem, the glory of God will be revealed and all flesh will see it together, as Isaiah chapter 40 describes it.

But now comes the more expansive work that God has for the servant. God says that it is too small a task to speak the word of truth and power only to those you have known and loved and whom you recognize as people like yourself in order that you might create again the community you had before the calamity of exile. No, says God! That is simply too trivial in the grand scheme of my desire for the world. "I offer you as a light to the nations in order that my saving work may reach to the very ends of the earth" (Is. 49:6b). The full task of the servant of God is nothing less than a beacon of light for the

whole world in order that all may see and experience the saving of God. This servant was initially summoned to reconstitute the remnant of the Israelite exiles, but Isaiah realizes that such a task is too small, too trivial. No, this servant will now be sent as a "light to the nations," in order that God's "salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

In fact, Isaiah echoes famous words from the book of Genesis 12:3 where Abram, God's chosen one, is called from his homeland to be one who "will bless all the families of the earth." In effect, Isaiah's great servant is a new Abram, fulfilling that call given so long ago. Little wonder that the early Christians read this marvelous passage and thought of the one they called Christ. That baby in the manger, so small, so unknown, so mysteriously hidden, for them became public in power and healing, finally despised and dying on a Roman cross. Why? To fulfill the role of the servant, they believed, to offer the light of God to the ends of the earth. The servant Jesus called his followers to attend to all, not just to some, not just to those they knew and loved and recognized as "one of them."

And so, he calls us to embrace the world, all of it, in order that all may have the salvation, the "making whole" of God, for them as for us. The call of the servant is to extend the saving work of God to the nations, to the whole earth. How are we light to that vast company? On Isaiah 49:6 rests the Bible's central claim that no one may be excluded from the salvation of our God. And our task is to continue to make that inclusion real in every place and time. We are in good company in the attempt to make inclusion real, aren't we?

Consider the central person in the reading from John's Gospel. Peter is considered to be one of Jesus' first disciples, the rock upon which the church has its foundation. But really, he was just a regular guy, a fisherman minding his own business when he was called to be a servant of Christ. We are all aware of his loyalty to Jesus, as well as his cowardice and denial during Jesus' trip to the cross. He was scared of experiencing the same fate as Jesus. Wouldn't we all have done what we could to save our hides?

But Peter's failures did not overshadow his faith or his passion. Peter ran to the tomb when he was told of Jesus' resurrection. Peter was with Jesus during the time after his resurrection and before his ascension. Spurred by accusations of drunkenness during the time following Pentecost, it was Peter who stood up to the crowds, telling them about the events of Pentecost, and demanding they repent. It was his declaration of faith in Jesus that converted about 3,000 people to follow Christ that day. And it was Peter who fought and won the battle to accept Gentiles into the church. Because he

knew that God's salvation was for everyone. So, I ask again, how are we a light to the world? How can we be like Peter and spread the Gospel to all, not just the elite few?

Jesus was sent by God to show us how and Peter was his main example. Be an orator, not a warrior. Evangelize through loving action and be nothing less than a beacon of light for the whole world.

Amen.