

Lenten Midweek 5 • March 25, 2015

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Isaiah 49:1-6

“Singing with the Exiles: One Little Word Can Fell Him”

As a child when the original *Star Wars* movies first came on the scene, I could tell you that lightsabers were exceedingly cool. As an adult looking forward to the arrival of *Episode VII* in about nine months – along with millions of other people – I can tell you that lightsabers are still exceedingly cool. Or hot, I guess, if you want to be technical. I checked wookieepedia.com (as one does), confirming that the lightsabers of the *Star Wars* universe are in fact high-energy plasma blades suspended in a containment field. Sharper than a razor, they can cut through almost anything in the universe.

I'm guessing that the Hebrew exiles in Babylon would have loved to have had their own lightsabers. “With weapons like those,” they might have thought, “we wouldn't have anything to fear from the armies of Babylon or anyone else. We wouldn't be stuck here, far from the land that should still be ours.” But as sharp as lightsabers might be, they're still not as sharp as God's Word.

In Isaiah's prophetic message to the exiles around 200 years along into the future, we hear of the Servant that God is sending, “making his mouth like a sharpened sword.” This Servant won't be fighting Babylon or any of the other enemies of Israel like Cyrus, who overtook the Babylonian Empire with his military might; no, this Servant is coming to deliver his people by bringing God's Word to bear. And while the Hebrew exiles might have wondered at the strength of that Word in the face of sabers and armies, it's a far greater power than any human force.

Throughout this message to the future exiles, the prophet reminds both them and us of the power of God's Word. Hear Isaiah 40:8, “*The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.*” Or Isaiah 55:10-11, “*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*” And Isaiah 50:4, “*The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary.*” As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, when God speaks, things happen.

But the exiles didn't see things that way: that was part of their problem. Cut off from their homeland, with the temple in Jerusalem reduced to remnants and rubble, the people didn't feel the need to listen to God's Word. That's what landed them in exile in the first place, though! The people failed to listen to the message of the prophets to turn away from evil, to turn back to the Lord who brought them out of slavery and gave them the Promised Land in the first place. In exile, they despaired in their defeat, again failing to listen to God's promise. They just looked to make life as comfortable as they could in Babylon, turning to temporary pleasures and quick fixes without regard for the Lord's instruction.

If you've known the despair that follows defeat or disappointment, you may have turned to quick fixes, too. When you've been hurt, you could just hurt back. When you have little time – or interest – for something you need to get done, you could just take a shortcut, or even cheat outright. When you're looking to something to lift you out of despair, you could focus your time and attention on something you think might help, doing so at the expense of the people closest to you who need you present.

So Yahweh sends His servant into the scene. He is the one comes bearing the sharpened sword of the Word of God to set right what is battered and broken, wrecked and wrong in our lives.

Jesus is that Second Servant. The first servant we heard of in the earlier chapters of Isaiah was Israel, God's people, but they continually failed in their mission to listen to the Lord and be the light to the nations they'd been called to be. Jesus came to take Israel's place as God's servant and to do what they could never do. That's why he entered into our world.

Today is March 25. On the church's calendar, it's the day that we observe the Annunciation of Our Lord, when the angel Gabriel came to Mary with God's powerful Word that she would be the mother of the Son of the Most High, the promised Messiah (Luke 1:26ff). But why today? We're still in Lent – it seems like it's way too early to be thinking about Christmas. Or is it? What will happen in nine months' time? (Hint: As cool as lightsabers are, I'm not just going to be celebrating the arrival of the new *Star Wars* movie.) Jesus, who could literally say that God “called me from the womb, from the body of my

mother he named my name” (Isaiah 49:1) came into our world as the polished arrow fired by God into the heart of His people’s enemies, sin and death. He is the Word Made Flesh.

Speaking a single word, Jesus makes things happen. In Matthew 8:5ff, we hear of the centurion who sent to Jesus seeking healing for his suffering servant, saying, “But only say the word, and my servant will be healed.” And it was so. He calmed the wind and waves with the command *σιῴπα* (*siopa*, “Be silent!”), a single word in Greek (Mark 4:39). With the single Aramaic word *κουμ* (*cumi*, “Arise!”), he gave life back to a dead little girl and gave her back to her mother and father (Mark 5:41). And with the single word *τετέλεσται* (*tetelestai*), Jesus spoke the ultimate single word for us: “It is finished.” On the cross, the Second Servant of the Lord took the place of his people to defeat the devil’s might once and for all. As Luther put it in the beloved hymn *A Mighty Fortress is Our God* (stanza 3), “One little word can fell him.” Truly, this word from God is sharper and more powerful than even a lightsaber.

As the faithful Second Servant, the new Israel who took the place of the Israel who came before him, Jesus brought restoration into the world. Unlike Cyrus who released the Hebrews to return back to their homeland, Jesus brought the restoration of a right relationship with God that they could never bring about through their own efforts. He does the same for us today.

God’s word of promise in Christ Jesus is for you, too. As we hear in Hebrews 4:12, “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword.” That living Word says you are forgiven. You are justified. You are loved. To the student who holds defeated dreams, He speaks. To the couple with a barren womb and fervent prayers, He speaks. To the Christian who daily fights with his flesh only to lose time after time, He speaks. To any person who has felt the sting of death, the power of the Law, or the torment of guilt, He speaks.

And so we speak back to Him, “Lord, only say the word, and we will be healed.”¹

Amen.

¹ Thanks to Dr. Reed Lessing for this passage, which opens with “To the student...”