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Isaiah 49:1-6. Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: Before I was born the LORD called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name. ² He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver. ³ He said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor.” ⁴ But I said, “I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing. Yet what is due me is in the LORD’s hand, and my reward is with my God.” ⁵ And now the LORD says— he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength— ⁶ he says: “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”

Jesus Took on a Lofty Task

- **Chosen to be the Savior of All**
- **Strengthened to Overcome Frustrations**
- **Listen to his Powerful Word**

It’s 7 days into the new year. How are your resolutions? Are you keeping them? Are you exceeding them? At the birth of a new year maybe you were determined to start fresh, and so you crafted some lofty goal or two: read more, exercise more, kick bad habits to the side, lose weight, read the Bible more, watch TV less, keep closer to the budget, start a budget, less time on Facebook, more quality time with your kids or grandkids, less junk food, enjoy a more healthy meals. The bar was set, and maybe it was pushed up high, higher than the previous year. Maybe that was you; and seven days in you are still going strong.

Or maybe you have been down that road before and you were a bit more realistic maybe even a bit pessimistic. You knew that there were obstacles that were going to give you trouble. Every year some things seem to pop up and it bothers your plans and create hassles and obstacles that keep you from where you want to be; and so now you have started to set the bar pretty low. Maybe you didn’t even bother setting any real goals for the year because of the possible frustrations that you would face.

Realistic, pessimistic, or optimistic. Where did you fall? Lowering the bar, under the bar, keeping your chin just barely at the bar; or are you ready to raise the bar higher. Where are you now?

Wherever you are today the LORD reminds us that it is good to be here, in his Word, as we focus on our perfect substitute, our Savior Jesus Christ. Today God’s incredible love is revealed to us in Jesus Christ as we consider the lofty task that our Savior would take on for us. As we start another year we also embark on another chance to journey with Jesus from manger to ministry, from cradle to cross. And as we take on this journey with Jesus, today we marvel at the goals that were set for him and that he would accomplish as the chosen Christ.

In our lesson for today, the second person of the Trinity, the coming Savior, speaks of the ministry goals that he would take on as the appointed Servant of the LORD. He was chosen to reach out and bring back to God the lost sheep of Israel. He was appointed as the one to be the

Savior, the long-awaited Messiah, the long-foretold Christ. But this task would not be easy. *The bible tells us that he came to that which was his own but his own did not receive him (John 1).* That rejection would not only sting, but it would even lead to his horrible suffering and death. And the Savior knew this would be the case. 700 years before he arrives as a child born in Bethlehem the Savior speaks of the frustrations that he would endure like they already happened. ***I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing.*** And even though he knew very well that the problems would come, and that they would be many; yet he still would come. He would come as God had promised. He would come and bring salvation. For this was the Lord's will. God would be honored and pleased by his coming, by his work, by his ministry. Out of love for sinners and out of love for God, the Servant of the LORD would take on this lofty task and confess his trust in God. ***“Yet what is due me is in the LORD's hand, and my reward is with my God.”*** Frustrations would come, but that would not keep him from his important task. The LORD would commend and reward him for his faithful service.

The Savior would still come. He would come because each one of those lost sheep of Israel were precious to God. Despite their wandering, despite their heritage of rejection and idolatry, he would come for them. He would come to bear their sin and wash it all away. He would come to call them to repentance. He would come to save them. And even though the Savior's ministry would be wrought with rejection and would look at times like an exercise in futility - as many refused that he was the Messiah, as his own people rejected him and called for his death. The people from his own home town of Nazareth was so enraged by his teachings that they wanted to through him off a cliff. Obstacles and frustrations would come, however, through these words the LORD reassured his servant that the he would faithfully fulfill this lofty task. In fact, the Messiah would not only be born to save God's people Israel, but here God the Father raises the bar and extends the Savior's mission. In his great love he would not only be born, and live, and reach out to the lost sheep of Israel, he would come for all of us. ***“It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”*** He did not lower the bar, he did not avoid the lofty task because of possible frustration, but he came as promised, he came for us all. ***A light for the Gentiles that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.***

How could that be? At the very scent of frustration and failure we as human beings are tempted to give up. We shy away from tasks that might be too great, we draw back from goals that might feel like they are too hard to reach, and no matter how well intentioned and motivated we are at the start of the year there are some goals that we may reach and there are some goals that we just do not and cannot accomplish. But listen to this wonderful message of salvation: the promised Savior came for you. Jesus came as a child born of Mary to be your Savior, to see to it that the message of salvation was fulfilled, and that that message was sent out to the ends of the earth. And the Servant of the LORD would be strengthened in his determination to accomplish this by the words and promises of God.

These words from the book of Isaiah present an interesting dialogue. God the Father and God the Son are having this heart to heart, this back and forth. In verses 3-6, God the Father calls his Son to accomplish this lofty task, the Son voices his concerns, and the Father reassures and strengthens his Son. There is this wonderful expression of relationship and trust and love

that is revealed to us. And the servant of the LORD strengthened by the reassurance of the LORD would go and accomplish his purpose according to God's good and gracious will.

They have this dialogue, and we get to listen to all this! We get to tune in to this conversation! And as his children this is something that we get to do as well. God calls us to live for him serve him with our lives, and he wants us and allows us to come to him and lay our laments our anxieties at his feet and through his word he strengthens and comforts and reassures us.

On this day we have another example of God strengthening his Son through his word. We get to stand by and listen as the Father sends another wondrous message of reassurance to the Son. As Jesus is baptized, heaven rips open, and this blessed relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is exposed in its heavenly brilliance. ***10 As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. 11 And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."*** Much like the words from Isaiah 49, we have words of blessed reassurance as the Father commissions his Son to go about this all-important work of salvation. Strengthened by the words of the Father, the Son goes out to do what he was made to do. To preach the good news of salvation.

And that is why he came. The child born in Bethlehem came for this very purpose, to live, and die and rise again, but that work of salvation would only benefit sinners if they believed. And so the Savior comes and one of his primary tasks as Savior is to preach the gospel, to proclaim the very words that save. And in his love he would send out his disciples to bring his word to the ends of the earth.

There is a pessimistic part of us that says, "What can words do?" "Why read my Bible more, why come to church so often, it's just a bunch of words that I have heard or read before?" More than just pessimism, this is our sinful nature teaming up with Satan as our enemy is grasping straws, trying to keep our ears closed, our minds distracted, from God's wondrous words of deliverance, from his saving gospel. The truth is that words do have power.

Even if we think about this on a basic earthly level we know that words can do a lot. Just a glance at what is going on the world testifies about the power of words. Words can disrupt the lives of many. Words can bring healing or start a movement, they can launch nations into turmoil or ease rising tensions. Words can be powerful. Whoever stated that "sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me" sharply underestimated the devastating sting that words can have when posted on social media that twist like a knife in the heart of a teenager who has to deal with those words coming back over and over again. There is an awful power in the words exchanged in anger between a husband and wife, or the words of those who taunt and bully and threaten in the workplace or at school or at home. Words can do a lot, and not just in a negative way. But a needed word of encouragement from a friend can lift the spirit of those who are down, a word of forgiveness can mend a relationship between sister and brother, a word of kindness can go a long way in restoring and healing a marriage. Words can do a lot; and this is especially true when they are the words of God.

Look at how the Servant of the Lord is reassured in his saving work. It is through the words of the Father. There is strength and power in the words of God. And then listen to what our Savior says about himself about who he is and what he would come to do. ***2 He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a***

polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver. ³ He said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor." The word of God, the Word made flesh, comes to speak the truth, he would speak with authority, and his words are powerful. Miracles and signs and wonders, power over death and demon, yes; but Jesus, the Savior, came to speak, to give us his powerful words, to make known God's love through clear teaching, to preach the good news that binds up the broken-hearted, that proclaims freedom for those held captive by sin and death. He speaks words that release sinners from the prison of guilt and shame. Words of warning and repentance that reach out and spare the sinner from damnation. He speaks words of instruction and guidance that serve as a lamp to our feet so that we might live out our lives of faith, guided and strengthened by the LORD. His words fly out to distant lands to make disciples of all nations. His words plunge into the depths of our soul, and while they often expose our sin, they also reassure us of God's love. His words tell us that we are valued, that we are forgiven and peace with our Lord. His words connected with the waters of baptism assure us that we are children of the heavenly Father and heirs of eternal life. We are loved, heaven is our home, and surely the LORD is with us always to the very end of the age. Our Savior comes and speaks his powerful word. He speaks words of forgiveness and salvation and his words have power and meaning.

What can words do? Well the glory of the LORD is on display in Jesus' preaching and teaching. We see the glory of the LORD hidden in his perfect life and his innocent death and glorious resurrection and we see it also in his life-changing, life-saving word. And through his church he has handed down this saving word that rescues, that heals, that strengthens, that saves. Through his church he has sent out his disciples to Go and make disciples of all nations teaching his word and baptizing all nations. And in his goal of sharing the word with the ends of the earth, the Savior tells that his word paired with ordinary water does extraordinary things. In Baptism we are brought to faith and given the Holy Spirit. Through God's powerful word connected with simple water we are daily strengthened to live for God and we are safely kept in God's gracious care. Our Savior tells us about all this and more in his word. He calls out to us urging us to simply, listen! ***Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations!*** So let's listen. May this be a year where we are in God's Word regularly. May this be a year when we think about our baptism more often and daily find comfort and strength in the power of God's promises connected to this special sacrament. Our Savior came for us to proclaim his powerful word that is full of wondrous assurance. Let's listen!

Maybe you have made some resolutions, maybe you have not, whatever the case may be, the LORD makes one thing very clear to all of us, year in and year out. He wants us to listen Jesus! The Savior comes; and he takes up this colossal task to be the Savior of the world. Despite the frustrations of coming to a sinful world Jesus is resolute in bringing to us, to you, his powerful word! Our Savior comes to proclaim the powerful message of the gospel, this wonderful message of salvation to the world, to you and me, to the ends of the earth. And with his word and sacraments he strengthens and renews us so that we may be assured of God's love and forgiveness. Through word and sacrament he strengthens us that we might live for our God and carry out our daily lives of faith, forever changed, daily transformed by his powerful Word and sacraments. ***Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant people!*** Jesus is the light of all the world and we give thanks for his powerful word and his gift of Baptism and the assurance and the strength that these precious means of grace bring to our lives and to our eternity. Amen.