

Sermon for Sunday, January 19 2014 (Epiphany 2) Isaiah 49:1-7, I Cor 1:1-9 Give Me Strength!

I was not the easiest of children.

I know this comes as no surprise to you. I was a challenge to my mother on a regular basis. Whenever I did something outside the realm of the ordinary, like turning a perfectly good pillowcase into a dress by cutting holes in it and dotting it with mercurochrome (because I had read a story about a girl doing that), or like arguing with her about having to eat something I disliked, or like hiding chocolate under the chair in the den where the television was because I wanted to have it handy for Saturday morning cartoons, she would shake her head and repeat the phrase that was both mantra and prayer, both hope and despair. She would roll her eyes heavenward and mutter "Give me strength!"

Give me strength!

Don't we all say that aloud or in our hearts when we are faced with a child who does things that make no sense, or with a hard task or hard people to deal with, or with a troubling person who makes our life difficult?

Give me strength! Give me what I need to get through this! Give me the energy to overcome, or just to survive. Give me what I need to do what is in front of me.

And the implied preface to the prayer is this: you gave me this, Lord. Give me the strength to deal with it.

More often than we care to admit, we are in a position where we feel overwhelmed and incapable of responding to our situation, and we call upon God to help us through it.

Typical intercessory prayer, as we would term it in the religion business. Give me strength. Help, God, lend me a hand.

If you, like my mother, have ever uttered that prayer, then Isaiah's words will hit home for you.

Here's the scene: The people of Israel aren't having too good a time of it either: they are a defeated nation, crushed by the Babylonian empire. Most of them are scattered from Mesopotamia to Egypt, but some are left behind. Their temple, the beating heart of their worship life, is a pile of rubble. Isaiah is, we know, a prophet, but the prophecy business is not going too well.

God has told Isaiah that there is a job to do here: to tell the people that things are going to be better, that they will once again be gathered together, that they will no longer be in captivity, that there will be a resurgence of good fortune after the dark days of Babylon. So Isaiah gets to work shouting out his message: "Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away!" If it were an email, it would be in all caps. Isaiah, chosen as a prophet by God, given words by God when the angel pressed a burning coal to his lips – words that were beautiful once he got past "ouch!" – sent to proclaim God's plans to God's people...

Isaiah, the bearer of God's message.

But now he seems to be having a moment of self-doubt: he says "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity."

Give me strength. Give me strength.

Something strange happens.

God, instead of saying, "you're just tired. Get a good night's sleep, have a bowl of chicken soup, you'll be fine," instead ups the ante. God says, "It is too light a thing – too trivial a thing - that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

In other words, Isaiah, it's not only your job to gather back together the dispersed and depressed peoples of Israel and restore the nation by the words I have given you, you now also are responsible for shining a light that will transform all the nations, to the end of the earth. There is a larger opportunity here...to save all nations. Go for it!

Can you imagine Isaiah hearing that and saying, "You've got to be kidding! Give me strength!"

One might say that God is a cruel God, hitting Isaiah when he's down, and yet there is more to the story. God knows that Isaiah is in tough shape – the prophet describes himself as "one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers." But God promises something: God is and will remain faithful, both to Isaiah and to the people of Israel. And implicit in that promise is that God's fidelity – not human fidelity, but God's fidelity – means that God is standing beside the prophet. God will give Isaiah and the people strength.

Strength to endure the completion of the term of exile, strength to get back home, strength to rebuild the nation...and now, with the additional command from God, strength to reach beyond the limits of Israel to be a light to the whole world.

Now when we talk about strength, what do we mean? When Isaiah laments how his strength has been depleted, he uses one word – *koah* – which has the sense of physical strength, vigor. It's used to talk about a man's strength. Isaiah feels like he has lost his mojo. But in the very next verse, when Isaiah says that God will be his strength, he uses an entirely different word for strength – *oz* – which is about might, power, God's strength. It's not just that God gives Isaiah back his own energy, he supplants it with something entirely different – God energy. If Isaiah's strength is 83 octane gas at the pump, God energy is 100 octane aviation fuel...

God's energy, God's strength, that's what we hear about in the Epistle as well. God's strength has fortified Paul through all the ups and downs of his missionary journeys. Now he is writing to one of the faith communities he founded, in Corinth. It is a community where people place a lot of emphasis on who has what kind of spiritual gift or talent and where that has led to something of a pecking order. If you've got this spiritual gift, you're more prestigious than someone who has that spiritual gift.

I don't know about you, but that doesn't sound particularly Godly to me. And I can imagine that Paul's reaction, when he heard about all this, was to raise his eyes heavenward and mutter "I thought I had these people focused on the message, but now they've done something stupid with it. Give me strength!"

But what kind of strength do these people claim in their silly "mine is better than yours" tiffs? Is it *oz* – the Godly strength that has the power to transform not just one community in one city, but to shine a light that can transform the world? Or is it *koah* – the strength that we frail humans have, a strength that is about pride or proving oneself or worldly measures of success? A strength that, by the way, is all too easily depleted.

Paul says something interesting in this beginning of the letter to the Corinthians. He masks it in a compliment – that they have developed in their spiritual gifts – but the real key here is that they have achieved that not through anything they themselves have done, but because God has given them grace. In the words of another rather infamous phrase, Paul tells the Corinthians, "you didn't build this. God did. You didn't make yourselves spiritual. God gave you the grace and strength to have these spiritual gifts."

God gave you God's *oz*, God's strength, because your *koah*, your human strength, was not going to be the source of it. To do God's work, you get God's strength through God's grace.

In a funny way, that message, echoing from the 6th century before Christ through Paul in the first century after the birth of Christ to today, should be a comfort to us.

And the key is that muttered "Give me strength."

If we remember that what will help us is not something we can manufacture ourselves, that it is not human strength that is the starting point, if we remember that God can and does give us God's own strength as a free gift of grace, if we

remember that God's strength is limitless and an offering of love from the One who created us, then we know something marvelous: it is not all on us.

We are not solely responsible for pulling together the energy to fix everything. We are not the ones who have to manufacture every idea to solve a problem. We are not the only ones who have to tackle awful situations. Because we are not the only ones, each of us individuals, who have access to the fuel pump of God's strength.

We do not have to struggle alone. The people of Israel, dispersed across the Babylonian empire, did not have to pull together one by one. Each far-flung Israelite did not have to put the whole of God's people together again. All they had to do was for each of them to feel God's strength drawing them together. Isaiah, God's prophet, frustrated and wondering if he was equal to the task, remembered that he didn't have to rebuild Israel all by himself. He had a pipeline to God's strength, and so did every other faithful follower of God who had access to the same pipeline. Paul didn't have to convert every Gentile in the known world personally, despite the strength he received from God to do it. He could rely on his missionary partner Sosthenes and even those wayward Corinthians, and Romans, and Hebrews to do the same, because they, too, had access to the same pipeline. John didn't have to be the only one spreading around the news that Jesus was the Lamb of God, as we heard in today's Gospel, even though he wrote a whole book about Jesus and his story. He had the gift of God's strength in him, and then he suggested that others – Andrew, Simon Peter – feel God's strength within them, so that they, too, could share the word.

The same thing is true for us.

I suspect that many of us feel like we have no way of being a light to the nations, of sharing the good news, of bringing together those who don't know God's love or who have forgotten it. We wonder if we have the strength to do anything like this.

If we're talking about that human *koah* strength, that's probably an accurate assessment. We'll run out of that low-octane fuel pretty quickly – do we get about 9 miles to the gallon? – and we'll feel depleted. And in that moment, we might say "Give me strength." Give me strength to do whatever you have set before me, God. Give me strength. And the high octane avgas will fill us, and it will fill up others who also are meant to do the work. We will feel that *oz* strength, that power that does not deplete, that takes us through the whole journey in partnership with God the source and with our friends and partners in the work God expects of us, those other recipients of strength.

So let your prayer be this: Give me strength. Give me strength for the work you have called me to do. Give me partners in the work. Give me your strength, O God, in your faithful encouragement and love and occasional kick in the pants and challenge to do more. Give me strength, O God, give me strength.

Amen.