

Isaiah 49:1-7
January 15, 2017

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

There is a movie called “The Internship”, which stars Owen Wilson and Vince Vaughn who play two salesmen recently been laid-off. In an attempt to find employment, Vaughn’s character applies for a summer internship at Google. Despite a lack of relevant technological experience the two are hired on as summer interns due to their unorthodox answers to interview questions. Upon arrival they are quickly viewed as rejects by their much younger peers who are the best of the best in today’s tech savvy world. It is made abundantly clear the task ahead of them will not be easy and many, even the head of the program, seem to have little if any belief in them in their success. The interns are paired up in teams and ultimately the team that wins will be given permanent positions with the company. Vaughn and Wilson’s team gets off to a rough start and the other members have little faith in their two older and seemingly inexperienced colleagues. However in the midst of it all Wilson and Vaughn reveal to their team they do bring something to the table even despite their obvious lack of computer knowledge. In one particular event in which the team is failing miserably, Vaughn’s character rallies the team into an inspiring comeback that unifies them

and propels them forward. Their characters bring a level of confidence to the other team members and force them to step outside their comfort zones of hiding behind computer screens and into the experiences of life they have been missing. However, toward the end of the movie Vaughn's character fails to properly log his customer service calls and the team loses that particular competition at which time Vaughn's character, viewing he failed, abruptly quits and goes to seek his former sales job back. However, Wilson seeks him out and leads him to seeing the team is incomplete without him. He didn't fail but rather he succeeded in every way in uniting the team together, bringing a unique set of communication skills to compliment the other team member's gifts and instilling in the team the confidence to believe in themselves. Vaughn ultimately returns and let's just say the rest is history.

Failure is not a popular word in our culture. Failure is viewed negatively. Failure, so many say and believe, implies there is some inherent weakness in a person's abilities to achieve success. Failure is something we avoid at all costs. So much so, that we at times choose not to take the risk of success so as to avoid the possibility of failure. Clergy are leaving the vocation in staggering numbers. In an article I read this week an unknown writer tells of a book he or she wrote in which after doing research it was discovered the major factor in why some pastors call it

quits is that many pastors become exhausted by failure. Too often the church tends to have such high ideals, such lofty plans, which rarely become reality and then the notion they have failed sinks in.

Yet, I don't think this line of thinking is applicable only to clergy but ultimately affects so many vocations and callings. The notion that we have failed breeds doubt and despair, which is the devil's playground. However, failure itself can very much be God's playground because there are many instances of perceived failure in the Bible that truly were not failures in God's eyes. Take for instance our story this morning from Isaiah. Now, the men of the Wednesday morning Bible study can tell you the book of Isaiah can be exhausting and maddening at times. It's not easy to read. It's challenging to comprehend what with 3 potentially different authors writing in 3 different times and contexts. Or take for instance at times it's really tough to tell just exactly who this servant is the book is referring to. Even in today's passage from Isaiah "ambiguity of the identity of the servant is evident in the language of the poem itself. God clearly addresses the speaker in verse 3 as 'My servant, Israel.' And in verse 6 the Servant is called to restore 'the survivors of Israel' and once again 'raise up the tribes of Jacob'", which seems to imply the servant as the prophet.ⁱ And of course early New Testament writers drew a connection of the servant to Jesus

– the ultimate suffering servant. All differences aside let us focus this morning on one thing.

That is this servant was called. Whether that servant was the people of God, Israel, who were to be a light unto the nations and reveal to the world that their God was indeed the One God among many false deities. Or whether the servant was the prophet whose mouth was like a sharp sword made by God in order to also be a light and instrument in order to proclaim God's salvation to the end of the earth. The bottom line remains this servant and all servants of God are created and called to a specific purpose and to be joined in the mission of God's continued work in the world. And like this servant we will at times feel and speak the same words, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity."

We, too, will often feel as we have failed. We will be overcome with a sense of despair and hopelessness that might even paralyze us and keep us from moving forward. We will become exhausted mentally and physically. We won't see the visible and tangible signs of our work, which might not truly blossom until years down the road. Yet, the fact remains we are called to do kingdom work. We are called to proclaim the greatest message to tell. The message the world needs to hear. The message no one else can offer and that is that in the end perceived failure is the ultimate victory. Christ's death may

have been deemed the ultimate failure of this one who called himself the Son of God. However, the ultimate victory came Easter morning through his resurrection that proves life will also have the final say over death. In this event, we see a God who gives. A God who loves. A God who saves. The world needs to hear this message. We are called to live it. We are called to proclaim it. In the words of Reverend Will Willimon, “The gospel isn’t a story about how Jesus came to meet your (our) needs, but rather a story about how Jesus enlists you (us) to work with him and on his behalf in meeting the needs of the world.”ⁱⁱ

I am sure the people of Israel, when taken into captivity by Babylon, also felt like utter failures. As a disappointment to God. As rejected and worthless. However, that is not the case because in verse 7 we hear, “Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, “Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.” Also, notice that even in the midst of his despair and perceived failure the prophets labors have truly not been in vain. “Despair and failure are not where our scripture ends. Though the prophet is honest about his sense of disappointment”ⁱⁱⁱ, he

proclaims “yet surely my cause is with the Lord, my reward with my God and my God has become my strength.”

You see as Willimon goes on to point out, “Sometimes when we think we have failed, God takes our failures and weaves them into God’s good purposes in spite of us.”^{iv} We must not be afraid of failure. In fact if we are going to work with the crucified Jesus, we probably had better expect failure. But we trust in these words, “Our cause is with the Lord. Our reward is with God. Our strength comes from the One who gave Himself for us and for the world.”

ⁱ Juliana Claasens, Commentary on Isaiah 49:1-7; www.workingpreacher.org

ⁱⁱ William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource January, February, March 2017*

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.