

South Highland Presbyterian Church

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The Outreach Foundation

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Text: Isaiah 49:1-7

Hugo, the title character of a wonderful book and recent movie, is an orphan who lives in a Paris railway station, tending to the station clocks following the disappearance of his alcoholic uncle. He scrounges food from the vendors and steals mechanical parts from the owner of a toy shop, Georges Melies. In fact, Hugo Cabret's father was a watchmaker, and he has inherited his father's talents for all things mechanical. Years before, Hugo's father found an intricate automaton, a mechanical man, but they could never figure out how it worked. In the film Hugo befriends Melies' ward, Isabelle, and together they have an adventure, one that centers around Melies himself.

At one point, reflecting on the mechanical man and the real people in their adventure, Hugo tells Isabelle, "When a person loses their purpose; it's like they are broken."

Broken. When we read through the Old Testament, we see how at different points God's people Israel lost their purpose.

God said to Abram that in him all of the peoples of the earth would be blessed. But it is hard sometimes for people who are uniquely blessed by God not to get stuck in their blessedness, to be overcome with a sense of their own exceptionalism. And it was true of God's people Israel.

Our Old Testament lesson is a wonderful passage from the section of Isaiah that talks about God's servant. At one level, this section tells us about the true character of God's people Israel. It is at the same time a prophetic passage which tells us about the messiah, a suffering servant, who was to come. And perhaps it also has something to say both to and about us.

I want you to note several things in the text about the servant:

v. 1) The Lord called him. There is a purpose to his life that has to do with who God is and what God is up to in history and in the world. "The Lord called me before I was born; while I was in the womb he named me."

v. 4) At a time when the servant's efforts seem to be in vain, in a time of discouragement, he remembers relationship with God and takes heart. His "cause" is with God and his "reward" is with God. Because the call upon his life has to do with God's purpose, ultimately the servant must trust not in himself but in the one who promises to be faithful.

v. 6) In thinking about that God-given purpose, it is, as the text puts it, "too light a thing" for God's servant to be focused just on Israel and Judah; rather, God's servant is to be a light to the nations.

Now, if I may personalize this text for me and you, perhaps even for South Highland Presbyterian Church, I would put it something like this:

- 1) The Lord called you. There is a purpose to your life that has to do with who God is and what God is up to in history and in the world. God wants you to participate in the things that he is doing.
- 2) At times when your efforts seem to be in vain, in times of discouragement, remember your relationship with God and take heart. Your “cause” is with God and your “reward” is with God. Because the call upon your life has to do with a God-sized purpose, ultimately you cannot and should not trust in yourself but rather in the One who promises to be faithful.
- 3) In thinking about the God-given purpose for your life, it is “too light a thing” for you to be focused on yourself and your family and this church. God has a global purpose for your life, to display his glory and grace to the world.

We are blessed to be a blessing.

In my work I have the privilege of visiting churches across this country and around the world. In a sense the work of The Outreach Foundation is making friends in the Presbyterian Church, and making friends in other lands, then introducing our friends to each other. We introduced South Highland Presbyterian Church to partners in Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe. It is a joy and a privilege. What I see, as I meet with churches at home and abroad, is that there are basically two different kinds of churches. There are those that focus outward. And there are those who focus inward. They answer in very different ways the question of for whom the church exists.

What I most often see in churches that are healthy and growing is an outward focus, an awareness that we are called together in order to be equipped and sent out into the world as instruments of God’s blessing. What I see in struggling churches, often in our own country and denomination, is a focus on the church’s institutional needs and the comfort and pleasure and preferences of its members. So the diagnostic question becomes this: Are we here primarily for ourselves, or for the sake of others? Have we been blessed in order to be a blessing?

Jesus says that as the Father sent him into the world, he sends us! He sends us to bear witness to the good news of Jesus Christ. Darrell Guder, professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, puts it this way: “The Gospel is news that is so urgently good that it must be shared.” That is what I see happening around the world.

A few years ago we welcomed to our offices in Cool Springs a woman in her 40s who has become a good friend. Li Mei Lan is pastor of the Nangang Church in Harbin, China. Like all of the churches in China, it was closed during the Cultural Revolution. The church reopened in 1980 and quickly had 500 members. She became pastor in 1986, and the growth continued. When I met Li Mei, the congregation had 5000 members and she was the only pastor. How do you do that? I asked her. I don’t, was her reply, and she went on to describe how she had worked with others to train 300 lay leaders who carry significant ministry responsibilities. Since that time, she has gotten an associate pastor – and another church with 3000 members. Her husband is also a pastor; he serves another large church in Harbin.

The situation in China is complex, but it is simply breathtaking to see what God is doing. When I was last in Beijing, at the end of a Sunday morning service just before the Benediction, the pastor made an announcement that I had never before heard. “If you want to stay for the next service,” he instructed, “go outside and get in line.” After the service the 1500 or so people in the sanctuary filed out one side of the church, and 1500 people waiting outside filed in. They repeat that three times on Sunday. Every Sunday. The church in China may be growing faster than the church has ever grown at any time in any place.

Ethiopia is another place where The Outreach Foundation is engaged, and it is thrilling to see how God is at work there. Fifty years ago our Presbyterian partner in Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus had 50,000 members. Mekane Yesus means “house of Jesus,” so when they invite people to come to church they are inviting them to come into the “house of Jesus.” Twenty years ago the denomination had grown to one million members. Today, it has 5.6 million members. A good friend of mine who spent decades serving as a missionary in Ethiopia said, “The Holy Spirit is out of control!” Which even makes Presbyterians in Ethiopia a bit nervous because, after all, they are Presbyterians.

A few years ago I was sitting with a group of Ethiopian church leaders, and I asked them how they account for the amazing growth of the church in their country. They replied, “It is a work of the Holy Spirit!” I acknowledged that but asked them what the Spirit’s work looked like and felt like in their lives. After thinking a bit, one of them said, “People say to us, ‘Because you are poor you pray a lot.’” Isn’t that something, the connection between a radical reliance upon the provision of God and the growth of the church. When they pray, “Give us this day our daily bread,” many of them really mean it. They went on to talk about their strong involvement of young people in the life and mission of the church who, when they are equipped for ministry, can easily reach their friends.

They described how people participate in their ministries. Much like China, leaders in the church focus on equipping members for ministry, just as it says in Ephesians. And they said, “We have suffered much persecution. Without it we would have been more careless.” They understand that faith in Christ is not primarily about their comfort and their convenience.

The growth of the church around the world is breathtaking! Paul Pierson describes the context in which new Christian communities are arising and thriving around the world this way: “Often they are born in situations of poverty, persecution, and corruption in which the Gospel is heard as incredible Good News, a word of hope and meaning to people who have lacked both.”

In some ways, the American Presbyterian Church as a whole has fallen into a pattern of institutional maintenance and a preoccupation with ourselves. An inward focus. Maybe we’ve just been caught up in a sweep of history that has resulted in us losing sight of how God purposes to use us to bless others. Richard Halvorson who served as Chaplain to the U.S. Senate described the sweep this way: “In the beginning the Church was a fellowship of men and women who centered their lives on the living Christ. They had a personal and vital relationship to the Lord. It transformed them and the world around them. Then the Church moved to Greece, and it became a philosophy. Later it moved to Rome, and it became an institution. Next it moved to Europe, and it became a culture. Finally it moved to America, and it became an enterprise.”

Truth is, lots of churches are broken; they have lost their purpose – at least their real purpose. And that is very different than what I see around the world.

A little more than a year ago while traveling in Niger, I saw a friend of mine, Rev. Hassane Dan Karame. From 1920 to 1960 there were 25 Christian families in Niger; from 1960 to 1990 the total rose to 3,000 Christians; and from 1990 to now the total has risen to 6,000 Christians. Niger is ranked next to the bottom of the UN Human Development Index. Hassane said that it is easy for Niger Christians to witness to Muslims because all of the Christians are from Muslim backgrounds. He noted that “Even Muslims want to turn over the education of their children to Christians, so there are good relations and the door is really open for the Gospel.” For him the Scriptures were the biggest influence in his coming to faith.

At the age of three Hassane began memorizing the Koran. His father’s plan was for him eventually to replace him on the Islamic leadership council in their town. As a youth, Hassane earned a scholarship to

a prestigious school. And there, among the 800 students, he found himself ashamed of their lack of devotion to Islam.

Few students came to the mosque, where Hassane shared in leading the prayers. So he started offering leadership conferences at the school. At one of the conferences one day, he asked the students a question about the prophets. The answers he got were disappointing, and he became more discouraged. About the answer the question himself, he noticed that one of the three Christians at the school raised his hand. He was happy because he thought that he was going to use the opportunity to become Muslim. The student replied, "No, I am going to explain the prophets." He stood up and talked about the prophets, answering the question with great skill. Hassane's disappointment became anger as he heard this eloquent answer from a Christian who was not supposed to know more than Muslims.

Later, Hassane decided to find out how he learned so much about the prophets, and the students told him he had learned it from the Christian book. Hassane's Muslim teachers had told him, "If you meet a Christian, don't read their black book." So he had been warned.

"This book, is it a black one?" The student answered, "Yes." And despite the warnings he had received, Hassane secretly at night began reading the Bible and did so for two years to know more about the prophets and so he could be the one who could be the best teacher. As he read, two verses in Ephesians 2:8-9 demanded his attention: *For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God -- not because of works, lest any man should boast.*

He went and asked the mosque's Koranic teacher, "You know about all that I am doing – I'm leading the mosque, preaching, counseling ... What about salvation? What about my salvation?" He said, "I don't know if you can be elected to heaven!" "Something's wrong!" Hassane replied. "You know all I'm doing in the Mosque, and yet you cannot assure me salvation?" He went back to my house and decided to give my life to Christ who was able to assure him of everlasting life.

When father learned about his decision, he convened the Islamic Council, which he led at the time, and the council voted to put Hassane to death by stoning. But because his father was its leader, the council reconvened later and changed their decision.

Instead, he had to leave home and go 700 kilometers away. They told Hassane's twin brother to go with him to convince me to return to Islam (although Hassane did not know that was his mission). He stayed with Hassane ten years, and he didn't know why he stayed. But one day Hassane's twin came to him and said, "I think I'm a Christian." They went and told their father.

Today, his brother and several others from that council are elders in Hassane's church. And they would tell you – they cannot help but speak about what they have seen and heard, about Jesus.

Like some of you, I spend a good bit of time in airplanes. A few years ago I read about an Indian airlines engineer name Bahadur Chand Gupta who, following his retirement, decided to try to make some money offering airplane rides. He figured that in a poor country such as India with lots of people interested in flying he might be able to set up a little business. He bought an old, broken down Airbus 300 and moved it to a field outside New Delhi. Each Saturday morning people come to ride on his plane.

Gupta sits in the cockpit and his wife leads the team of flight attendants. They use a battery-powered portable PA system to give the pre-flight safety instructions. After they reach cruising altitude his wife and the others serve in-flight refreshments from tea carts. They encounter turbulence and have to fasten their seatbelts. Before landing the passengers hear the obligatory announcement about returning

seatbacks and tray tables to their full, upright and locked positions. And they land. The thing is, it is missing a wing and a tail section and never gets off the ground.

The article quoted a young teacher named Jasmine, and I mean not to make fun of her, who said after the flight, "It was much more beautiful than I ever imagined." But just imagine if she had really flown!

For me that plane has become a kind of metaphor for the church. So often God's people get focused on themselves and forget that we are called to be out in the world proclaiming good news to those who desperately long for it, binding up the broken and the broken-hearted, displaying God's glory and grace. We have been blessed to be a blessing. Too often, instead of soaring on the winds of God's Spirit we go through the motions, sitting broken a few meters off the ground.

Truth is, we are all a bit broken, and we forget that we've been blessed to be a blessing. But know this friends, **YOU ARE SENT**. That is why God brings us together, to equip us to live in the world in ways that disclose his glory and grace. God can use you and he can use no one else, your passion and gifts and experience, your networks. He sends you to the places where you live and shop, work and play, to share his love. To speak a word of hope to a world that is broken and afraid; to bind up the brokenhearted; to care for those in need. To give in ways that bless. To show his love and tell of his amazing grace.

Amen.