

## Isaiah 49:1-7: **Light to the Nations**

C. Nolan Huizenga, Highland Presbyterian Church, 18 January 2026

The prophetic book of Isaiah elevates history and theology into high art. Written and edited over a couple hundred years, likely, this poetry coheres as an extended exploration of God working out divine will for Israel and for all the world.

Isaiah tells a story in which God's chosen people do not sweep from triumph to triumph. The first 39 chapters largely convey the judgment of God for the leaders and the people practicing rampant injustice. Isaiah of Jerusalem, the prophet for whom the book gets named, interprets as God's will Judah's suffering at the hands of regional empires. That anguish will peak when Babylon exiles many of God's people and smashes their homeland. Isaiah 39 ends on that bleak note.

Overwhelming scholarly consensus tells us that the *next* section of Isaiah, chapters 40-55, comes from about 160 years later. A new prophetic author picks up the story. And the terror, the exile — the judgment — has already happened. In fact scary Babylon is itself crumbling as a new power arrives in the region: the Persian Empire.

So the part of Isaiah we'll hear from today addresses a remnant of people who already have lost everything. And this time the God speaks to the exiles comfort, hope, restoration. And God reminds them they still have a mission.

For cultural reasons this text employs a lot of male pronouns referring to God. It's too linguistically awkward for me to change them all, though we know that God is not a man. God instead is the divine source of all gender. Underscoring that point, you should know that just a few verses past what I'll read God is compared to a mother compassionately nursing her child.

Listen with me for God's word to us from the book of Isaiah, chapter 49.

Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away!  
The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me.  
<sup>2</sup>He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me;  
he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away.  
<sup>3</sup>And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

<sup>4</sup>But I said, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;  
yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God."  
<sup>5</sup>And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant,  
to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him,  
for I am honored in the sight of the Lord, and my God has become my strength —  
<sup>6</sup>he says, "It is too light 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."

<sup>7</sup>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."

Terrible things are happening outside. At any time of night and day, poor helpless people are being dragged out of their homes.... Families are torn apart; men, women and children are separated. Children come home from school to find that their parents have disappeared. Women return from shopping to find their houses sealed, their families gone.<sup>1</sup>

Those scene could have been 587 BCE when the Babylonian Empire deported much of Jerusalem's population, solidifying its reign of terror.

The same words also vividly describe January 2026 in the streets of Minneapolis and Saint Paul, MN.

But the description I read to you was written in January 1943. Occupied Amsterdam. It's from the diary of Anne Frank, hiding with her Jewish family from Nazi soldiers terrorizing the city.

Aimee and I once visited the Anne Frank House, now a museum and memorial. We walked through the Secret Annex, above her father's workplace, where Anne hid for 761 days with her parents, her sister, and four family friends. A discreet community of six non-Jewish helpers brought food and supplies and news to the people in hiding.

Tensions ran high. Fear was constant. They were deprived of sunlight and exercise. Available food went from scarce to terrible. Right in the middle of their own city, they lived in secret exile. But Anne and the others persisted for over two years. Until someone — it's unclear who — betrayed them to the police, who quickly turned them over to Nazi prison camps.<sup>2</sup>

This week a Minnesota pastor reminded us colleagues of Anne Frank's witness. And as our nation remembers Martin Luther King tomorrow, clergy in my circles have been conveying a lot of prophetic grief and alarm for the present day.

My seminary friend Stina is an accomplished theologian and minister who also offers pastoral coaching. When I met her online this week for my coaching appointment I first asked how she was doing. Her face displayed a bunch of emotions and she said, "Nolan, it's really bad."

Stina and her family live right between Minneapolis and Saint Paul. She described firsthand how 3000 federal ICE agents in full assault gear have invaded homes, cars, and every kind of public space. Most terrorized are immigrants and people of color, targeted indiscriminately for abuse, detention, or worse. Many restaurants and businesses are closed because workers and customers anticipate ICE brutality arriving anytime. Some ethnicities seem to be singled out for viciousness. But white skin color also won't keep someone safe, as the cruel killing of Renee Good last week revealed.

I felt like Stina was giving me a preview of what's likely coming to other American cities that welcome immigrants, like ours.

Another seminary friend of mine in Minnesota, Ben, posted this:

A lot of people are scared in the Twin Cities, minorities and immigrants especially. There are now three times more ICE/CBP agents in the Twin Cities than the Minneapolis and St.

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<sup>1</sup> Frank, Anne. "Wednesday, January 13, 1943." *The Diary of a Young Girl: The Definitive Edition*. Edited by Otto H. Frank and Mirjam Pressler. Translated by Susan Massotty.

[https://archive.org/download/anna-frank-diary/Anna%20frank\\_diary.pdf](https://archive.org/download/anna-frank-diary/Anna%20frank_diary.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Learn about Anne's history and experience at the Anne Frank House website:

<https://www.annefrank.org/en/>

Paul Police Departments combined. We have seen videos of armed masked men in unmarked vehicles going door to door on blocks we know well, asking neighbors to report on Asian, Central and South American, and Black (especially Somali) families. There are armed checkpoints set up at grocery stores and at places like Walmart and Target. My neighbor [knows] an immigrant...who was picked up while taking out her trash. Some have told us about elderly immigrants especially being targeted. An ICE agent threw a flash bang into a family's SUV yesterday, injuring 6 children....

Bottom line: immigrants and minorities are making preparations for friends and neighbors to care for their children if they get detained. Some of us are carrying passports everywhere we go.... And I have to think twice about letting my Asian kids walk a couple of blocks to a friend's house.<sup>3</sup>

And my friend Erin pastors a church in New Jersey. She sent this note to several of us:

Got word from one of my members...that ICE is expected to be active in our town tomorrow. I ask for prayers for us in our community, especially because I realize that I might be a target because I do look Latina.<sup>4</sup>

I know that's a lot of bad news to absorb. If you feel overwhelmed, you are not alone. But we can't pretend otherwise. Because we people of faith, like the prophets, must face the painful realities that God's people experience in the world — in history and right now. Only through that truth-telling can we begin to see something else too, like a work of grace by the one who made us.

"I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

<sup>7</sup>Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers." (Isaiah 49:6b-7a)

Here in Isaiah 49 we encounter an enigmatic voice, a servant, who's called to preach God's good news to the whole world. It's the voice of one who has failed, who has suffered, who has serious self-doubts, one who knows what it's like to be hunted and despised. Beyond that the text leaves the servant's identity mysterious.

Regardless, this word of new life is for *all*. Because this suffering servant discovers the word of God in his mouth, the restorative power of God flowing through him. Here's the good news of Isaiah 49: Those who suffer are never forgotten by God. Like this servant, like the city of Jerusalem itself, God empowers them to *live*, to stand up, to regather in faithful community, to become vessels of healing and redemption who bring light not just to their own people but to all the nations.

In the book of Isaiah, God wills homecoming after exile, deliverance beyond judgment.<sup>5</sup> Persia, that new power, will free Jerusalem's exiles to go home, to rebuild, and to serve their God anew. "By being a faithful partner in the covenant relationship with Yahweh, Israel equips itself to be an instrument of God's saving acts on behalf of the whole world."<sup>6</sup>

The Bible shows God continually electing people not out of favoritism but for the purpose of blessing many more. It was true for Abraham and Sarah, for Jacob and his family, for Joseph in Egypt, for the Babylonian exiles, for Mary and Joseph in Nazareth, and for Jesus ministering, dying, and rising.

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<sup>3</sup> Facebook post, 16 Jan 2026.

<sup>4</sup> Text message with clergy friends, 16 Jan 2026.

<sup>5</sup> Noted by Walter Brueggemann in *Isaiah 40-66*. Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998. p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Hanson, Paul D. *Isaiah 40-66*. Interpretation series. Louisville KY: John Knox Press, 1995. p. 126.

That's also a tangible lesson for us here and now. Whether we are the ones suffering oppression, or whether we're the ones bearing witness to oppression, God can empower us — all of us — to become instruments of God's saving acts. Suffering may come with that role, yet divine light can blaze through the cracks of our tired spirits.

Of the eight Jews who hid in the Secret Annex, only Anne Frank's father Otto survived the war. On his return to Amsterdam, one of the helpers gave him Anne's diary pages that she had gathered up following the arrests. Recognizing their value, Otto worked to get his daughter's journal published. Although Anne had died tragically in a Nazi labor camp, her printed words told the world the truth about courageous resistance to a racist regime. And so much more.

Anne Frank was becoming a young woman during her years in hiding. She fought with her mother. She shared her first kiss with the one teenage boy in hiding with her. Her diary reveals her passionate humanity, hoping and caring so much for the world and its people. She writes about travel and personalities and who she wants to become beyond the awfulness of her current situation. Her exile in Amsterdam, like Israel's in Babylon, was not the last word. Through her writing Anne shed illumination into the world. Could that be one more instance of God's chosen people blessing all the nations?

Such lights shine among us also. My pastor friend Stina in the Twin Cities told me that her networks of church folk and community leaders and simply people of goodwill are all working nonstop to care for their neighbors. They're feverishly collecting and distributing money to pay rent or utilities when immigrants are too terrified even to go to their jobs. The community is pooling resources to deliver baby food to families running out. Kind people are going food shopping on behalf of neighbors who may be Somali, Hmong, Mexican, Vietnamese. Light to all the nations indeed.

Another pastor and theologian I'm close to, my spouse Aimee, spoke this word of hope on Friday. She said, "There is still possibility that this will become a story of the people's triumph over authoritarianism. Hold onto that vision amid the terror."

And through Isaiah the Lord says, "I give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." What if trust in God amid all the discouragement *is* that liberating light?<sup>7</sup>

With that kind of trust, you and I can preach with Isaiah and with Jesus:

The Lord has sent me to bring good news to the poor,  
to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim release for the captives,  
and liberation for the prisoners,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

In the name of the Star, the Light, and the Reflection.

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<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Margaret Odell for that insight. "January 18, 2026: Commentary on Isaiah 49:1-7." Working Preacher website: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-isaiah-491-7-7>