

## A Double Whammy over Need

Sermon for the 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity

Sermon Text: Isaiah 49:1-6



*Listen to me, O coastlands, and give attention, you peoples from afar. The Lord called me from the womb, from the body of my mother He named my name. <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 right is with the Lord, and my recompense with my God." <sup>5</sup> And now the Lord says, He who formed me from 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 eyes 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 bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth."*

Recently, the German government announced a huge aid package. Chancellor Scholz commented that this was a double whammy against the crisis. The significance of such a double whammy is that with this double whammy, the problems are blown away, or at least lessened. Of course, we all know that it's not that simple. Nevertheless, we all have the fervent wish that there might be something like this, a remedy for all problems. The reality looks different. Isaiah the prophet announces a type of double whammy too! He received a two-part assignment. He should first bring salvation to Israel and then also to the whole world! And the question that we immediately have is this: Is that realistic or crazy? Meanwhile, there are so many people promising all kinds of things. Why can the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, of all people, do more than anyone else? Let's look at what he has to offer. What does he have more of than others? Nothing! That's right. You heard correctly. Isaiah has neither clever arguments nor powerful weapons to show as proof. He also didn't bring much money with him. In the true sense of the word, he had nothing to offer and that's why he says: *"I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity."*

It is noteworthy that Isaiah, in describing his actual state, uses a word that was used in the account of Creation before God had created the world. When Isaiah describes his ministry, he quotes the Bible and says, it was "nothing!" Before Creation, it says in the Bible: it was *"Tohuvabohu."* Translated, that means: "formless and empty." And that's exactly how Isaiah describes himself. It was like he was in nothing. He existed there, disoriented and meaningless. He didn't know where to go or from where he was coming! Without God's creative power, he was nothing and also had nothing to show. He had no power whatsoever. And the other word that Isaiah uses here is *"Hauch."* You can think of this word like exhaling on a cold winter morning. You can briefly see the white wisps coming out of your mouth like a white flag. But then it's quickly gone again. It's the same way with Isaiah too. Again and again, he kept talking and realized that his words had no effect. Instead of the people listening to him or even following him, they ran away from him, they mocked and despised him. They even threw him in prison and tortured him... Isaiah's powerlessness and helplessness can be easily understood. If you sacrifice your whole life for one thing and are constantly faced with failure, it can lead to despair. We also ask ourselves why God so rarely lets good win? And why does He allow so much evil? Why couldn't God just sweep away all our problems with the stroke of a big feather? We can't find the answers to all these questions. We only realize that God in His work is never tangible and comprehensible. That means we can never come to a point where we can say with human evidence and reason that God has definitely shown what He can do! No, God remains hidden.

God doesn't cry out loudly against injustice; no lightning bolt comes from heaven to kill the evil people and reward the good people, either. And therefore, Isaiah has absolutely no evidence at all that he could offer anything. It was like this in Isaiah's life and always has been. It still is. This is especially the case in the person of Jesus too. Can you see salvation in Jesus? No! Can you measure it? No! Can you prove it? No. On the contrary, in that moment where Jesus saved the world on the cross, instead of salvation, we see disaster and total failure. Jesus experiences the worst kind of powerlessness! Extreme helplessness! And the deepest abandonment by God. Nothing and no one would have dared to stand up there and say: "Look, there is your salvation! There is your God!" And yet it is so. It is so because God wanted it that way and not because people wanted it that way. Again, we must return to the story of Creation. When everything was formless and empty and there was no shape and no life to see, GOD spoke! Thus, the world was created and only because of this. Everything came from His holy Will and not from human reason. And this is how God's work has always been throughout history. There, where everything is desolate and empty...and where there is extreme human abandonment, God speaks, and it happens. This is exactly the reason why Isaiah stood up and used his double whammy. Isaiah stood in the name of God and therefore in the authority of God. Isaiah didn't have the assignment from God to speak, rather God Himself spoke through Isaiah. And when God enters the scene in this way, He still uses the exact same tool as at Creation. God uses His Word. He speaks and it happens! God's Word, as Isaiah sees it, is powerful and sharp like a sword and like an arrow that is shot from a bow! The only thing is that you can't always see, measure, or estimate these results, and especially not with human understanding. The question here is how Isaiah the Prophet, and how we as a church, deal with a situation in which we can't measure or see the result. Time and time again, I feel frustration and resentment with Christians. This resentment is not good. It distracts us from what God is doing and we then only dwell on our weakness and failure. So, we can't talk joyfully about Jesus Christ and keep getting stuck in our own mess. Isaiah manages to get out of this quagmire, and he only manages to do this because he realizes that he isn't the one who proclaims the Word of God, but it is God Himself. Isaiah doesn't just receive a mission that he must accomplish – God Himself is with him and God Himself is the mission. You can perhaps think of it as getting the chance to walk in the shoes of a very famous person for a day. Imagine that the shoes of German chancellor Olaf Scholz are in front of your door. And imagine that you wouldn't just get to wear the chancellor's shoes but also have his authority so that you would have the power to make important decisions. And as long as you walked in these shoes you would act in his authority and do his job. This is exactly how Isaiah explains his job. Ultimately, it isn't Isaiah who speaks. He just stands in these shoes. But the shoes that Isaiah received aren't just some famous person's shoes – they are God's shoes. God Himself entrusted His mission and authority to Isaiah. He was allowed to speak and act in God's name. Yes, you heard that correctly. The God who created the whole world with His Word gives His messenger His Word.

And that's how Isaiah could actually bring salvation through God's Word. Salvation not just for his people, but for all people. This mission of Isaiah's was brought to completion through Jesus' cross and His resurrection. From this point, we may know that God didn't just give His Word to Isaiah, but to the entire Church because we may also now stand in God's shoes and say in His Name: "your sins are forgiven!" And when this Word is spoken, it is God Himself who speaks it. And these Words are enough to overcome the gates of Hell and to break the chains of death so that we can be free. That is truly more than a double whammy! That is your defense against sin, death, and the devil. Amen.