

8 December 2024

## **Light for the Nations**

Isaiah 42:5-9

We humans are social animals. From our earliest days on earth, we have self-sorted into groups for mutual care and support. At first, these groups were family groups – clans with a common ancestor – like the ones we read about in those early chapters of Genesis: the families of Cain and Seth, the families of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and so on. All those genealogies, so boring to read today, indicate how important the clan was to ancient humans. Without your clan, you were nobody, and were probably dead. Of course, humans being humans, clans also developed in opposition and competition with other clans, so that the first wars were fought between clan groups: fighting over grazing land, water access, hunting rights, and eventually slaves. Genesis also hints at this, describing disputes over wells, and slave-taking raiding parties between tribes. Thus the clan, originally developed as a source of mutual protection, soon became the very thing that other clans needed protection from. Humanity is nothing if not predictable.

Something else about clans: at the same time that the human social impulse was prompting us to join together in family groups, the human religious impulse was growing as well. In a word, we began to grasp the concept of gods, beings beyond us whom we should worship, and that concept quickly merged with the clan mentality, leading to the idea of tribal gods. Putting all this together, we ended up with each clan having its own god, conceived of as the founder of the clan and its provider and protector. When clans went to war, those wars were seen as contests not just between tribes but also between their gods, with the victory going to whomever had the strongest god. In the world of the Bible, wars were carried on between the Moabites and their god Marduk, the Ammonites and their god Rimmon, Edomites and their god Chemosh, and so on. Each god had his own tribe and also his own territory. That meant that if you moved to a different land, you switched gods – I mean obviously! Chemosh has no power in Moab: that's Marduk territory. So if you move to Moab, you switch to worshipping Marduk. Duh!

And then there was the clan of Abraham. They were weird. I mean, they had their own tribal god, too – a god whose name we no longer know how to pronounce. It had the consonants Y-H-V-H, but we don't know the vowels, so it could have been Yahveh, Yovah, or Yahu. Seriously, it could have been any of them. But this tribal god was different from others. This one moved with the clan, and expected to be worshiped exclusively, even when the clan was in another god's territory, if you can imagine. At one point, the Abraham clan moved to Egypt and ended up staying there for centuries, as slaves, but get this – even though Egypt had a wide range of top-quality gods (Dozens of them! Of every shape! Egypt was like the Walmart of gods!), nevertheless the Abraham clan continued worshipping their own. In fact, the Abraham clan even taught that their god was not only the founder of the clan, but was in fact the founder of the whole world, and therefore was greater than all the other gods. Pretty presumptuous, right?

But, you know what? Their god *was*, in fact, pretty impressive. He led the Abraham clan out of slavery Egypt, in spite of the Egyptian armies and all their gods, kept them alive in the desert for a generation, and then led them into the land of Canaan, displacing all the clans and their gods who were already there. The Abraham clan became the nation of Israel, and the people who lived in lands bordering Israel soon realized that they wanted no truck with Israel's god. Nobody wanted to mess with Yahu. Or, you know, whatever.

But then, some seven hundred years after the Abraham clan became the land of Israel and took possession of that territory, Israel was destroyed. The capital city, Jerusalem, was dismantled, and the great temple to Israel's God was looted, torn down, and burned. The Israelites who survived the destruction were taken off to the land of their conquerors, to Babylon, slaves and exiles once again. It was a stunning, crushing, inconceivable turn of events, but among the clan of Abraham living in exile, there was a stirring of an ancient memory – that their God was different, was not tied to one land. One of those exiles, a prophet whose name we don't even know, but whose words appear in the second half of the book of Isaiah, wrote this.

We read Isaiah chapter 42, verses 5-9:

<sup>5</sup> *Thus says God, the Lord,  
who created the heavens and stretched them out,  
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,  
who gives breath to the people upon it  
and spirit to those who walk in it:*

<sup>6</sup> *I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,  
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;  
I have given you as a covenant to the people,  
a light to the nations,*

<sup>7</sup> *to open the eyes that are blind,  
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,  
from the prison those who sit in darkness.*

<sup>8</sup> *I am the Lord, that is my name;  
my glory I give to no other,  
nor my praise to idols.*

<sup>9</sup> *See, the former things have come to pass,  
and new things I now declare;  
before they spring forth,  
I tell you of them.*

There is so much more here than we have time for – but let me just sketch a few of the remarkable things in this proclamation. First, this prophet from the clan of Abraham who was living as a captive in a foreign land was going to continue worshiping Abraham's God. The fact that Babylon defeated Israel did not mean that Babylon's god was stronger, because in fact Israel's God is bigger than any land, or any clan. Indeed, Israel's God is the one who created all the earth and the heavens. Every breath that every human on earth takes is a gift from Israel's God, because *there is no other god*. This was new. Abraham and his clan had always been taught not to worship any other gods, but this prophet adds, "It's a waste of time, anyway. There's no one there. Our God *is* God."

And that leads to another revolutionary idea: Therefore, Israel's God is not *just* Israel's God, not just the god of the Abraham clan, not a tribal god at all. The prophet says that God made Israel to be *a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness*. God's longstanding relationship with the clan of Abraham had not been an exclusive tribal thing but rather had been the first step in a worldwide plan. The people who had known the One God were to become a sign to the rest of the world, a light to the nations, a beacon guiding them toward a better worship, a better faith, a real god. In another passage, in Isaiah 49, the same prophet

presents God saying, *It is too small a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.*

It's not hard to see why the early Christians saw these passages as foretelling the work of Christ, who opened the eyes of the blind, delivered those who were in bondage, and brought the light of salvation to all – not just to the clan of Abraham, but to all people. The vision of this prophet in exile was stunningly fulfilled in ways that even that visionary couldn't have imagined. Behold, the old dispensation has had its day; now something new has begun.

So isn't it a pity that we keep trying to retreat into our clans and keep trying to turn our God into a tribal god? We keep locating God in our own territory – pretending, for instance, that the United States is a new Chosen People, with proprietary rights over God, or that God is on the side of our political party. Even within the Christian world, we keep designing God after the fashions of our own clans: a macho, AK-47 wielding Christian Nationalist Jesus; a social justice oriented, eco-friendly, gluten-free Mainline Christ; a well-bred, tasteful, meekly inoffensive Anglican Jesus; an entrepreneurial CEO-style Evangelical savior with vision-statements and action-plans and quarterly earnings reports. We keep imposing on God our own clan's specifications, then putting up walls against all the other gods. The more we divide into separate political and cultural clans, the more convinced we become that God is part of our group. Our God is on this side of the wall. You stay over there. This is our God's territory, and we're part of the right clan of the correct god.

Now I'm not saying that all our different tribal gods are equivalent or equally valid. That is obviously not so. It wasn't so in ancient Palestine, and it isn't so now. Any clan that tries to paint Jesus as Rambo or as a jargon-spouting corporate bureaucrat has clearly lost the plot. They're just making stuff up. What I am saying, though, is that – as the prophet of Isaiah 42 declared – God is larger than any of our groups. Our task is not to condemn other clans, or even to correct them: our job is to be light of the God that is, shining for all nations, all tribes, all clans, all people.

Light is such a fertile metaphor. Last week I talked about how God in Christ is a light in the darkness, the glimmer of hope in the night of despair. Now we discover that that light is not just for us. That light that brings hope is to be a light to all people. Our lives, our words, our actions, our relationships – these are all to show the light of Christ beyond our own clan. It is too small a thing that we should be a light just to those who believe like us, who share our perspectives and opinions. We are to be a light to all nations. And the first step toward allowing that light to shine is maybe ... just maybe, we could stop retreating into clans, maybe stop blocking God's light with our walls.