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Erik Herrmann

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, herrmanne@csl.edu

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This second of Isaiah's so-called Servant Songs continues the theme of Israel's redemption. Like the exodus of old, God will gather his people out from under the hand of oppression and bring them back to himself. And as in the former days, this salvation will be accomplished through a chosen servant, a vessel and instrument of Yahweh's salvation. Yet the continuity of God's saving act is now punctuated by a newness heretofore unknown. Israel's existence is darkened by more than exile—idolatry, greed, and injustice have cast deep shadows over her life. The servant's task is more profound and more difficult than that of Moses. Not simply freedom from chains, but freedom of the heart, not only a return from exile to the warm glow of house and hearth, but a journey from wickedness to the bright country of justice and righteousness—this is the servant's monumental mission.

Perhaps then we should not be surprised that the servant now expresses frustration. His message—though forged by Yahweh like a sharpened sword—seems unable to penetrate the hardness of hearts. Through no fault of his own, his labor bears no fruit; it all seems vain, futile, empty.

Yahweh's response to this frustration is remarkable and further unfolds the surprising "new thing" that he is doing: "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." In the midst of his apparent failure, God expands the servant's mission—not just a guide for wayward Israel, but a light to all the nations. The darkness extends over every people and they too need the light. How is it that apparent failure becomes the occasion, indeed the catalyst for an even greater work of salvation?

While Isaiah's fourth Servant Song gives us a deeper glimpse into this mystery: "But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed" (Is 53:5), it is the cross of Christ that shines the brightest. Precisely in the rejection of Christ when his message and mission appear thwarted and ruined by the crucifixion—precisely here is where his mission begins its greatest expansion and success: "When I am lifted up, I will draw all men to myself ... God so loved the world ... the light shines in the darkness."

Today the church faces frustration and failure. A decline of members, a hostile cultural landscape, a disillusioned generation—the church’s labors seem futile. On the one hand, our failures might be attributed to our own shortcomings—we do not always faithfully and fully live in the church’s vocation as a “light unto the nations.” Yet even when we do labor as God’s servant, we do so embodying Christ’s body. We testify to God’s salvation as a body wounded and scarred, often rejected and scorned. But we know that our labor is not in vain. Just as God was faithful to his servant Jesus and raised him from the dead, so we live and bear witness to this undying hope in him. This is the great epiphany—the mystery hidden for ages but now revealed, the surprising “new thing” of God’s salvation!