January 17 & 18, 2026 – Epiphany 2

Isaiah 49:1-6

Dear friends in Christ Jesus:

There is a Bible passage I really like, a passage that is there in my mind every time I sit down to work, there to provide comfort and encouragement, there to keep me going. Because sometimes as I look at all I am doing I just sigh, **"All that Work for Nothing?"**

Any of you ever feel that way? Maybe you've spent all afternoon preparing a wonderful, home-cooked meal. You've made sure everything was just right–and then your spouse calls and says they're going to be late, really late and that you should eat without them. **All that work for nothing?**

Or maybe that's how you feel when you have a project at work that you put your heart and soul into. Then you boss says that they don't really need that anymore. **All that work for nothing?**

All that work for nothing? We feel that way sometimes, don't we? And if we feel that way sometimes about things that matter very little in the grand scheme of things, can you imagine how God should have felt after the fall into sin? For six days, God created the heavens and the earth and everything he made was perfect. For six days, God ordered everything exactly the way he wanted it to be. For six days, God prepared this world for the crowning jewel of his creation, mankind, to live and love and serve him. And after six days God looked it all over and said it was very good. And all it took was one minute for Adam and Eve to ruin all of it. Can't you imagine God thinking to himself, **"All that work for nothing?"** And what do we do when we reach that point of frustration? What do we do when we feel as if all we've done is for nothing? Sometimes, we give up, don't we? Sometimes, like a boxer who's taken one too many punches, we throw in the towel and say, "Enough, already." If anyone had the right to give up, to throw in the towel, to wipe the slate clean and just start over it was God. That's what was deserved. But he didn't.

Whenever there's a really important conversation going on behind closed doors, people want to know what's going on in that room. Today, the prophet Isaiah has brought us into the throne room of our heavenly Father. We are given a front-row seat to listen to a conversation between God the Father and God the Son. And it's there that we find out why God didn't just start over. He had a different plan. **"Listen to me, you coastlands. Pay attention, you faraway peoples! The Lord called me from the womb. When I was inside my mother, he mentioned my name. He made my mouth like a sharpened sword. He hid me in the shadow of his hand. He made me a polished arrow. He concealed me in his quiver. He said to me, "You are my servant Israel, in whom I will display my glory."**

You may hear someone who really loves their job or is really good at their job say, "I was born to do this." In reality they could have done many things. To say that they were born to do one thing or another really is overstating things. But that's not true of John the Baptist and Jesus. They were born to do exactly what they were doing. John was born to be the forerunner of the Messiah. He was born with the specific purpose of preparing the way for Jesus to come. And then, when Jesus came, he was to point people to him. And the same is true of Jesus, isn't it? Jesus was born to be the Messiah. And Isaiah confirms it today: **"The Lord called me from the womb. When I was inside my mother, he mentioned my name. He made my mouth like a sharpened sword. He hid me in the shadow of his hand. He made me a polished arrow. He concealed me in his quiver. He said to me, "You are my servant Israel, in whom I will display my glory… But now the Lord, who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to turn Jacob back to him, so that Israel might be gathered to him…"**

There was never any question what Jesus was going to be when he grew up. He knew it before he was born. He knew it when he was 12 years old in the temple. He knew it as he was being baptized in the Jordan and when he performed his first miracle. Jesus knew that this is what he was born to do. And what was he born to do? To be God's servant. To bring glory to God by being what the nation of Israel could never be. Jesus was born to be the perfect substitute. But not only was Jesus to be the perfect substitute for the world, he was to call the world to himself and to the Father. Isaiah says, **"The Lord said: It is too small a thing that you should just be my servant to raise up only the tribes of Jacob and to restore the ones I have preserved in Israel, so I will appoint you to be a light for the nations, so that my salvation will be known to the end of the earth."** And Jesus knew it. That's why he said just before he was arrested and was on the path to Calvary,

**"Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son so that your Son may glorify you. For you gave him authority over all flesh, so that he may give eternal life to all those you have given him."**

But that doesn't mean it was easy for Jesus. In fact, it wasn't smooth sailing at all for Jesus. Satan was constantly at work against Jesus, tempting him to doubt God's promises. Listen to what he says in verse 4. **"But I said to myself, "I have labored in vain. I spent my strength and came up empty, with nothing."** Chosen by the Lord to serve as the Prophet, to reveal the Lord's Word to the world, Jesus spoke with a tongue as sharp as a sword. He spoke clearly and powerfully to all. In Nazareth, he preached the good news, announcing that he was the Messiah. And what happened? They all rejoiced at God's goodness and fell before him in worship? Not exactly. Instead, they tried to take him to the edge of town to throw him off the cliff. **All that work for nothing?**

Jesus went on and preached to the crowds in Judea and over the course of three years gained quite a following. And when he announced that he was the Bread of Life and that only those who trusted in him would live, how did the crowd respond? In one, loud, glorious voice, "You are the Messiah. You are the Savior! You are our Life!"? Not exactly. They said, **"This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it."** Most turned away and no longer followed him. **All that work for nothing?**

Jesus carefully instructed his disciples about his purpose in entering the world. When he told them that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders and chief priests and that he must be killed and on the third day rise again, how did those disciples respond? They all worshipped him and praised him for his willingness to die for them? Not exactly. Peter, speaking on behalf of the disciples, said, **"Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you." All that work for nothing?**

Where was the success the Father had promised? Where was the glory? Outwardly speaking, his mission had been a failure. His statistics were decidedly unimpressive. Instead of hundreds of thousands, just a handful believed. If it were us, we probably would have given up and thrown in the towel. Do you see why the Father called his Servant into service? Because he knew Jesus wouldn't quit. He knew he wouldn't give up. Jesus faced the very things we face: our doubts and questions and fears and worries and frustrations. Only as a true man, under the law, could Jesus put himself in our shoes and walk in our place. So he did. We hear in the second half of verse four the way he walked on our behalf. **"Yet a just verdict for me rests with the Lord, and my reward is with my God."** Jesus never doubted. Jesus was a man of perfect faith. Even when his eyes told him he had failed, he continued to trust. He believed the Lord would bless his labors. He trusted the Lord would grant success to his work. He trusted when there was no earthly reason to trust.

It's because Jesus trusted when there was no earthly reason to trust that he could be accused of our sin of unbelief and be punished in our place on the cross. It's because Jesus trusted when there was no earthly reason to trust that God has declared the world innocent of all sin. The Lord promises that all who trust in Christ have Christ covering them. His trust is their trust in the sight of God. Because God sees Christ covering us, God sees us as ones who have perfect faith. We may see something entirely different when we look into our hearts. We see doubts. We see fears. We see unbelief. But God sees perfect faith. By his Spirit, through Word and Sacrament, the Lord continually guides us to see what he sees in Christ, not what we see in ourselves.

Like Jesus, our perfect Substitute, we too were born to do something. When we were born of water and the Word in Holy Baptism, we were born to be God's servants. We were born to bring God glory. We were born to have God be our strength and our reward as we do his work. Like Jesus, our perfect Substitute, God has equipped us with the sharp sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, to take to the world. We are all polished arrows that fly straight with the good news of sins forgiven through Jesus. We too have been born to be a light to the world, to bring a nation to God through his Word and Sacraments. That's what we were re-born to do.

But that doesn't mean it's going to be easy. Like Jesus, we may outwardly seem like failures. We may even feel that we're doing all this work for nothing. But labor for the Lord is never for nothing. That's why I like that passage from 1 Corinthians 15:58, the one I say to myself so often, **"Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourself fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."** (NIV '84) Amen.