

2026. **Isaiah 49:1-7. John 1:29-42**

God's people had been defeated, the Israelites' temple was destroyed, and they were taken in chains to Babylon, alienated from their land and their God. Under these circumstances, the exile must have been a profound crisis of identity and faith.

Into this crisis, Isaiah speaks a word of hope: God will send a servant who will establish justice, bringing about the return of the Israelites to their homeland and the promise of a restored temple and nation. The disorientation of exile is replaced by a new orientation that is more than simply returning to the way things were before. God has something far greater in mind. Isaiah shouts this news, and he has a message not for Israel alone, but for the whole world. And this message is from God: God has raised up a servant, God has made this servant the instrument of God's glory (verse 3).

God gathers God's people into God's life for one purpose: the salvation of the world. God charges Israel, God's servant, to be "a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (verse 6). God takes the particular historical moment of Israel's exile seriously, yet God is not confined to that single moment. Just as exile is not the end of the story, neither is restoration; God's story points toward the renewal of all creation. "The Holy One, who has chosen you" (v. 7) calls Israel to inhabit not only its homeland, but also its identity as God's blessing to the world.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus' ministry begins with a question: "What are you looking for?" More accurately, in the original Greek, it is "What are you seeking?"

This is a question worth wrestling with, both as individuals and as a church. Our answers will profoundly shape what we find and the journey we take.

To recognize and respond to a sense of being called is to become both a seeker and a follower. Answering a call initiates us into a journey of growth and transformation, inviting us into an ongoing process rather than leading us to any final certainty.

Then he turned to those around him and began his ministry by creating relationships and learning who they were and what they needed. Then, he reached out to connect their deepest longings to the love and justice of God being revealed in their midst.

Perhaps this is also where we can begin, in this Epiphany season, to discover the collective vision we are working toward, the community we are building together, and the role we can play in the unfolding story of God's redeeming love for the community.

Have you ever been to a bamboo grove? The stalks can grow very tall, up to about six meters.

Do you know how they manage to survive such strong winds and harsh cold and still make it to spring?

One reason is that when the winds begin to rage, they remain flexible. From their bases to their very tops, bamboo can bend, absorb the stress of a push or pull, and distribute that energy throughout their entire structure. Even as the wind snaps branches and topples other trees, the bamboo only bends low.

The bamboo groves sway this way and that, their six-metre tops sweeping close to the ground before being buffeted upward and forced to bend in the opposite direction. They move with the wind, bowing deeply but never breaking. And when the storm finally passed, the bamboo stood upright again—rooted and whole. Like bamboo, bending is not weakness—it is wisdom. It is knowing when to stand firm and when to yield, when to speak and when to listen, when to act and when to rest.

Another reason is that bamboo trees grow in groups. You never see a bamboo stalk standing alone. A single stalk may look thin and fragile, but together they tell a different story.

Even when strong winds blow, bamboo trees support one another and remain standing. That is why they rarely break. They endure harsh conditions through their flexibility, gentleness, and unity. The bamboo's agility and nimbleness are inspiring, and their steady, evergreen presence teaches us about divine presence, community, resilience, and grace.

As we begin this new year and embark on a new journey toward amalgamation, this story reminds us that strength is not always about standing tall. Sometimes, it's about learning to bend. The year ahead may bring challenges we can't yet see—uncertainties, concerns, and anxieties about the future. Like the bamboo, we may face strong winds that threaten to uproot us.

But what if, instead of resisting, we chose to bend? What if we resisted knee-jerk reactions that make us hard and unyielding, and instead trusted the deeper strength of flexibility, faith, and resilience?

Storms may come, but they don't define us. What defines us is how we respond—how we root ourselves in love, bend with grace, and rise again with courage.

God's salvation work moves outward, always expanding toward eschatological fulfillment, "that my salvation may reach the end of the earth" (verse 6). God's story is always bigger than ours, holding our stories within God's life and weaving them into the wide-open future.

Also, Jesus invited his new disciples to participate in his ministry. He asked them to follow him further to discover what they sought. The rest of the gospel provides deeper insights into Jesus' identity if only we "come and see."

Being called to be disciples is an invitation not only to seek something, but also to join a community and be part of the something.

We can encounter Jesus many times, and in each encounter, Jesus would say the same thing: come and see. Come and see God's grace made manifest, accessible, and available to all.

As we enter a new season and year, let us ponder our calling in our lives and in this community of faith.

Jesus called us to come and see, let us come together to see what God is doing in us, and let us walk and work together, inviting others to come and see what God is doing in and through us.

Let us dance like bamboo trees, nimble, responsive, and resilient together, rooted in resilience, flexibility, and deep grounding.

The new year invites us to face the future not with fear, but with principled courage: by practicing love, trusting the rhythms of life, and choosing each day to

be both rooted and flexible—to remain grounded in what matters most while adapting to whatever comes our way.

We may face the storms ahead, trusting that grace will hold us steady and that love will prevail once again.

Let us pray,

O God, we thank you for helping us see ourselves as we are, as beloved children.

Thank you for calling us to come and see what you've done for us; empower us to invite others to come and see what you've done in us and through us.

Give us courage as we remain being called by God to follow the way of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. Amen.