

Freedom and Salvation

Second Sunday After the Epiphany

Isaiah 62:1-5

¹ For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. ² The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give. ³ You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. ⁴ You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married. ⁵ For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

In an article: **The relationship between major depression and marital disruption is bidirectional**, Andrew G. Bulloch Ph.D., Jeanne V. Williams M.Sc., Dina H. Lavorato M.Sc., Scott B. Patten M.D. Ph.D., in their 01 October 2009 article gave this abstract (<https://doi.org/10.1002/da.20618>):

Abstract

Background: Marital status is important to the epidemiology of psychiatric disorders. In particular, the high prevalence of major depression in individuals with separated, divorced, or widowed status has been well documented. However, the literature is divided as to whether marital disruption results in major depression and/or vice versa. We examined whether major depression influences changes of marital status, and, conversely, whether marital status influences the incidence of this disorder. *Results:* Major depression had no effect on the proportion of individuals who changed from single to common-law, single to married, or common-law to married status. In contrast, exposure to depression doubled the

proportion of transitions from common-law or married to separated or divorced status (HR=2.0; 95% CI 1.4–2.9 P<0.001). Conversely an increased proportion of non-depressed individuals with separated or divorced status subsequently experienced major depression (hazard ratio, HR=1.3; 95% CI 1.0–1.5 P=0.04). *Conclusion:* The high prevalence of major depression in separated or divorced individuals is due to both an increased risk of marital disruption in those with major depression, and also to the higher risk of this disorder in those with divorced or separated marital status. Thus a clinically significant interplay exists between major depression and marital status. Clinicians should be aware of the deleterious impact of major depression on marital relationships. Proactive management of marital problems in clinical settings may help minimize the psycho-social “scar” that is sometimes associated with this disorder. Depression and Anxiety, 2009. © 2009 Wiley-Liss, Inc.

You may well wonder why I sited this article. It reminds me of the situation Israel found itself in when our scripture was written. Isaiah 62:1-5 shines with good news about God's vindication of Jerusalem. In many churches this morning the scripture is the Gospel of John's account of Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding in Cana. That talks about the joy of new beginnings. But Isaiah 62 does not end where it begins. Before the good news of changed names and weddings, there is a call by the prophet for God to set things right. Our scripture starts with a lament, like those who have gone through the depression of divorce or other major loss.

In chapters 40-55 of Isaiah, the prophet announced God's intention to bring about the defeat of the Babylonians and the return of the exiles. In chapters 56-66, those events had

taken place, but all was still not right. The Babylonians may have been defeated, but the restoration and rebuilding of Jerusalem had met obstacles and delays. In our scripture, the prophet was addressing a people who had been full of hope but battled the deteriorating morale caused by broken dreams and crumbling faith. The people wondered if God was powerless to fulfill the promises made during the era of exile—or if God was indifferent to the plight of God's people.

In this context, the prophet did not announce another promise or declare another good news headline. The prophet's first audience was not Israel; it is God. The prophet began by demanding that God do something about the situation: "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch" (v. 1).

Part of the power of the Bible is the good news it has to offer to people who desperately need to hear such news, but the other part of the Bible's power is its ability to name the reality that people are facing. For example, a young but wise preacher visited one of her members in the nursing home where he lived. He did not speak or look at her. He simply stared straight ahead. Instead of trying to chat with him, she went straight to the Psalms. When she read one of the laments there, his face softened and he looked at his visitor for the first time: "Finally, somebody knows how I feel."

Someone knows how we feel: this was the power of our scripture for the discouraged returnees and for anyone of us dealing with the feeling that God has turned away in indifference, in our times of hardship, depression, loneliness, illness and all the other challenges we face. To follow the prophet's example, we can acknowledge the reality we face when dealing with defeat and broken dreams before we move to words of hope and new beginnings. Otherwise, the good news we share can feel empty and even untruthful.

Isaiah 62 also gives us a model for honest prayer when life is difficult and God seems distant, if not indifferent. We dare to follow Isaiah's lament and bold protest because those are elements of the prayers of God's people just as much as words of thanksgiving

and praise. Isaiah's protest to God reminds us that in our prayers "[t]here is nothing out of bounds, nothing precluded or inappropriate. Everything properly belongs in our conversation of the heart. To withhold parts of life from that conversation is in fact to withhold part of life from the sovereignty of God."

Isaiah's lament and protest in chapter 62 cannot be ignored, but neither can it properly be seen as Isaiah's last word. There is good news here—very good news, made explicit in a change of names.

Names in the Old Testament offer clues to the character of the person named. A change in name can represent a change in character, such as the new name of Israel given to Jacob (Gen. 32:28). Here in Isaiah 62 the name change does not just describe the change in Israel's character; it also describes the change in God's relationship with Israel and in Israel's future. Instead of being called "Forsaken," Israel can be called "My Delight Is in Her." Instead of the land being called "Desolate," the land may be called "Married" (in Heb., *be'ulah*), a name that signifies God's commitment to Israel and Israel's good future.

Name changes also can signify a change in relationships and in the future. When a husband and wife hyphenate their names, or more traditionally, when a woman takes her new husband's last name, the change in names is intended to symbolize the new relationship and the new future for each partner. When a neglected child goes through the foster system and is then adopted by parents ready to love her as their very own, then her change of surname is good news signifying a priceless gift of love and a new future; freedom and salvation.

What the prophet announced to the people of Israel, God has revealed to us in Jesus Christ. We "who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Eph. 2:13). We, who may properly be designated "sinners," have been renamed as God's "beloved children." We too have received a priceless gift of love and a new future.

The prophet began with a bold protest against how God appeared to have turned away from God's people. The prophet ended with names signifying how God has turned toward God's people—and with the image of a wedding. God has not turned reluctantly to face us; God comes toward us with all of the delight and joy that a bridegroom has for his bride. What a startling image of God's grace this is, full of attraction to and love for us.

Everyone loves a good wedding. (Bill Cruther's daughter Wendy has invited me to officiate at her wedding in August.) Weddings not only show the love of the couple, but also signify the joy of our relationship with God. In a wedding we do get a glimpse through the bridegroom and bride of God's great and personal love for each one of us.

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Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word - Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.