

Greatly Rejoice

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

¹⁰ I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

¹¹ For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

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.

The couple bounced across the threshold of the office. They move their chairs together—a makeshift loveseat—and hold hands. Ginny and John, as we will call them, (or Ruth and Ivan, for those who knew that couple). They are old enough to be grandparents; this will be their second marriage. After many years of matrimony John's first wife left home one Monday morning and did not return. Ginny married young and the relationship spiraled into a destructive cycle of emotional abuse. "It was bad," she whispers.

The mathematics of marriage looms above wedding canopies. In our time, half of the marriages in North America end in divorce. The dissolution of so many sacred unions seems strange with the delight and promise of a wedding day. Before God and witnesses, the pastor pronounces the beginning of a shared commitment, introduces the couple, and invites them

to express their love with a kiss. Guests applaud. The buoyancy of that moment floats with hope.

In his reflection on Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*, Miroslav Volf reminds us of the difference between optimism and hope. Volf writes, "Optimism is based on the possibilities of things as they have come to be; hope is based on the possibilities of God irrespective of how things are.... Hope is grounded in the faithfulness of God and therefore on the effectiveness of God's promise." Given their experiences, it would not be surprising if Ginny and John felt a mix of optimism and hope. As people of faith, they know well the sharp edges of a forsaken marriage, and they trust in God to bring light from the darkness. With hope, they write new vows, plan a ceremony, and move toward their wedding day in the shared pursuit of happily ever after. **Andrew Nagy-Benson**

Before the writings of our scripture ([Isa. 56-66](#)), many of the best and brightest of Israel, most of them young men and women and children, were taken as captives, or exiles, into Babylon. Scripture tells us how they wept for their homeland and pined to be part of their own people again ([Pss. 126, 137](#)). For decades they lived, worked, married, and bore children. Many of them did their best to make a home in a land not of their choosing, but all the while, many of them struggled to keep the vision of their true home bright in their memories and imaginations, and to keep that vision alive for their children and grandchildren. They were the ones who welcomed with relief the prophecies that assured them that freedom would come. Freedom eventually did come, and the exiles—or, rather, their descendants—were allowed to return to the homeland they had longed for. Our scripture is part of a song of praise for that long-awaited deliverance. **Katherine C. Calore**

The theology of hope and the metaphor of marriage surface throughout the later portions of Isaiah. If we read the scriptures around this text, we find both evidence of a painful separation and reason to hope.

The question is: has Israel left God, or has God left Israel? The prophet asserts that the sins of Israel have brought about the exile. God speaks through the prophet: "Yet you did not call upon me, O Jacob; but you have been weary of me, O Israel!... You have burdened me with your sins; you have wearied me with your iniquities" ([43:22](#), [24](#)). Thus, Jerusalem—the feminine personification of Israel—has remained desolate during the years of exile, and she laments, "The LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me" ([49:14](#)).

And yet God responds to Jerusalem's despondency with a pronouncement of reconciliation. God's capacity to save Israel transcends their capacity—and ours—to turn away. Not only will the exiles be reunited with God in Jerusalem, but they will adorn the city like the jewels of a bride; again, God speaks: "As I live, says the LORD, you shall put all of them on like an ornament, and like a bride you shall bind them on" ([49:18](#)).

In [Isaiah 61:10-62:3](#) that future day arrives. Jerusalem beams like a bride. The city breaks into song: "I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God" ([v. 10](#)). Joy returns to Jerusalem with all the hope and promise of a second marriage. After our scripture, God offered Israel a reason to hope; God said, "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" ([62:4](#)). The ceremony of remarriage has begun.

Marriage between God and Jerusalem signifies newfound fertility for Israel. Like her ancestor Sarah, Jerusalem's reunion with God promised the

birth of children – and that of generations to come. Like the ancient decree of Genesis, Jerusalem will again "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Gen. 1:28). The rebirth of postexilic Jerusalem includes the promise of new life.

The prophet underscores this hope by planting his listeners in a springtime garden. Here we imagine God growing Israel from the ground. The wasteland of a broken relationship will now burst forth with green shoots. Past taunts from neighboring nations—*God has surely left you, Israel!*—will now give way to the world's newfound praise of Israel and her God. Imagine Israel turning green and dream of foreign jeers turning to cheers, which is not easily done. It is the work of hope that is grounded in the faithfulness of God.

In 1945, in the wake of a world-rattling war, Ruth Krauss wrote a children's book called *The Carrot Seed*. A young boy plants a carrot seed. He tends to the weeds and waters the ground, but his parents and older brother are not optimistic. Still, the boy tends the plot and waters the ground. His family remains dubious. Then one day, "a carrot came up, just as the boy had known it would." The carrot is larger than life, larger than the boy.

This image of that carrot underscores the promise of bounty and growth for Israel. It calls us to cross the threshold of hope, where old wounds are healed, where impossibility yield to God's ability to bring something green from the cold ground. And it calls us to consider the new life that God has brought forth in Bethlehem.

Like the carols that linger on this first Sunday of Christmas, this passage from Isaiah celebrates God's desire to be with God's people in a new way. The promise of reconciliation gave Israel hope. The promise of God's steadfast love gave Israel reason to sing again. From age to age, we repeat

the sounding joy: "I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God" (v.10). **Andrew Nagy-Benson**

For us as Christians our scripture looks to salvation in Christ. It tells us we "shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give" (62:2). This is only one of many new things that are promised—the Lord is going to do a new thing (43:19) and declare new things (42:9; 48:6), in response to which we are to sing a new song (42:10); and all this will culminate in new heavens and a new earth (65:17; 66:22). Newness flourishes everywhere by the grace of God. God's word brings us comfort (Isa. 40:1). Luke 4:18-19 identifies the speaker of Isaiah 61 as with Jesus Christ by having him announce his ministry in a Nazareth synagogue with a modified reading of 61:1-2. "[The LORD] has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels." The Lord not only clothed Jesus, but clothes us as we "put on Christ" as we are cleansed at our baptism; as we receive the righteousness which God freely gives by the grace of God in Christ. Calvin remarked that we as believers in Christ are like Jacob impersonating his brother Esau, hiding "under the precious purity of our first-born brother" although we do not deserve the blessing thereby won. For those of us who struggle with feeling unworthy of God's grace, this can be an eminently important image.

Christopher B. Hays

Today, each of us can greatly rejoice because God sent Jesus into the world that we might have love, salvation, hope, joy and peace that only Jesus can give!

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