

I Will Recount

Isaiah 63:7-9

⁷ I will recount the gracious deeds of the LORD, the praiseworthy acts of the LORD, because of all that the LORD has done for us, and the great favor to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love.

⁸ For he said, "Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely"; and he became their savior

⁹ in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

Still lingering from the afterglow of Christmas cheer and after the Christmas crowds have thinned out, Isaiah sings, "I will recount the gracious deeds of the LORD, the praiseworthy acts of the LORD, because of all that the LORD has done for us" (v. 7). Unfortunately for many of us who sit in this post-Christmas congregation, the profound feeling in the air does not reflect what Isaiah chants in these verses. Fatigue and financial woes, dashed expectations and lingering doubt are often the lyrics of the unsung song of post-Christmas people, rather than gratitude and praise.

Reading all of Isaiah 63 can give voice to the complexity of post-Christmas emotions. In the first six verses of Isaiah 63, we hear the voice of fatigue and disillusionment, but it is not a human voice. In these verses, we hear the voice of God, who is fatigued and disillusioned with the so-called "people of God." In verse 6, God cries aloud, "I trampled down peoples in my anger, I crushed them in my wrath"—not exactly a dose of Christmas cheer and obviously an easy verse for us to hear. These verses give voice to a God who cares profoundly about "God's people."

So much about Christmas in and out of the church suffers from shallow sentimentality. "Be of good cheer" masks the reality that much of the time life is anything but cheery. Throughout Advent and Christmas, popular culture bleeds over into the church's theology as baby Jesus rides with Santa on the way to battle the

Grinch. Pre-or post-Christmas, we hear far too little about the God who cares deeply enough for the world to enter the human fray and to be encountered by the horrors of Herod. As chapter 63 opens, Isaiah speaks first in the voice of an angry and disillusioned God who is not interested in spiritual sentimentality but in a community of the faithful who will live in covenant fidelity despite their circumstances.

If ever the church is to sing of God's saving grace, it is on the Sunday after the boxes are unwrapped and the trees have dropped their needles. So, often we lament, "Where was God when we needed God the most?" Here in chapter 63, God laments the unfaithfulness and ingratitude of "God's people." God grieves, "I looked, but there was no helper." The faithful covenant people of God were nowhere to be found, and so God grieves. On the First Sunday after Christmas calls us to a long memory of God's faithfulness and the people's fickleness. Even more importantly—and unlike the human tendency to give up on those who disappoint and anger us—Isaiah calls us to remember the one who maintains covenants, even when "my people" do not: "He became their savior in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity, he redeemed them."

On the popular children's television program, Sesame Street, one character is the count...who loves to count everything he sees...whether that is people, monsters, toys, letters or any other thing that can be counted. The prophet asks us to join in counting what God has done for us! In this year the Catholic Church has a new pope; a new prince was born to the royal family of the United Kingdom; the Affordable Health Care Act effected more citizens; there was a government shutdown; Nelson Mandela died; a contract worker exposed the government's surveillance program; natural devastation in the Philippines; wars in Syria and Afghanistan; and unspeakable corruption and exploitation in African nations. In our

own lives we experienced sadness and grief; illness; uncertainties...but through it all God has been with us to see us through until this point in our lives.

At the time of our text Cyrus had allowed the return of those who desire it from Babylonian exile. They have come back to a life in Jerusalem that they believe will be joyous and bountiful, only to find a life of extreme hardship. The prophet spoke to these disillusioned people reminding them of the powerful works of God who had already and would again make things right for them. In this brief section, Isaiah describes the ways God delivered them from Egyptian captivity. Two themes stand out in this passage: the character of God as a parent to humankind and God's concern for the liberation of the enslaved.

On this First Sunday after Christmas, after the birth of the Son of God is celebrated, this passage from Isaiah reminds us about how God is parent to all God's children. Hebrew biblical scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann asks us to consider God's attributes in Isaiah as both motherly and fatherly; that is, the fierce God of [Isaiah 63:1-6](#) gives way to maternal imagery. In God's care and concern for Israel, the prophet tells us that God "lifted them up and carried them all the days of old." In [Isaiah 46:3-4](#), the prophet said God reminded the remnant that they had "been borne or carried by God from their birth, carried from the womb." God is with God's children like a mother who carries her children in her womb and then, once they have been delivered, lifts her children up to her hip to keep them out of harm's way. In these instances God deals with them tenderly, in an "abundance of steadfast love" ([v. 7c](#)), looking on God's lost children with love and pity ([v. 9b](#)).

Brueggemann encourages us to expand our understanding of the capacities of one parent so that a single parent, whether male or female, can be both fierce and tender, angry and pitying. Such an understanding of the capacities of a parent of whatever gender, as derived from the capacities of God as parent, liberates earthly fathers and

mothers from restrictive (earthly) models of what a "real" mother or "real" father is like, since the capacities of a parent are vast.

This passage also speaks of a God who has delivered and will again deliver God's people from exile. In remembering the actions of God in the Egyptian captivity, Isaiah reminds us that God desires freedom for humankind. God stands with humankind to work for our liberation; love and mercy characterize God's engagement with us.

The passage also tells us that it was "no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them" (v. 9a). God did not give God self to the captives through an intermediary, but was present to them in their suffering and in their release. It was, the prophet tells us, God's being with them in love that "redeemed them." **Emily Askew**

There is a song called Through It All¹ by Andrae Crouch. The words remind me of our text:

I've had many tears and sorrows,
I've had questions for tomorrow,
there's been times I didn't know right from wrong.
But in every situation,
God gave me blessed consolation,
that my trials come to only make me strong.

Chorus:

Through it all, through it all,
I've learned to trust in Jesus,
I've learned to trust in God.
Through it all, through it all,
I've learned to depend upon His Word.

¹ From: <http://www.elyrics.net>

Verse 2:

I've been to lots of places,
I've seen a lot of faces,
there's been times I felt so all alone.
But in my lonely hours,
yes, those precious lonely hours,
Jesus lets me know that I was His own

Verse 3:

I thank God for the mountains,
and I thank Him for the valleys,
I thank Him for the storms He brought me through.
For if I'd never had a problem,
I wouldn't know God could solve them,
I'd never know what faith in God could do.

As we enter a new calendar year and approaches the celebration of Epiphany, perhaps one gift of this text is a resolution worthy of a church-wide effort to keep. Instead of pledging ourselves to exercise every day in the coming year or to lose all the Christmas fat or to watch less TV and read more books, maybe this text invites the community of God's people to a new practice of prayer and a new way to live in the world. What if, even when the world is harsh and ugly and severe, the people of God awoke each day to speak and then live this prayer: "I will recount the gracious deeds of the LORD, the praiseworthy acts of the LORD, because of all that the LORD has done for us?"

I suspect this prayer would extend Christmas far beyond its twelve days and would remind us that Christmas is always far more about God than about us. **Gary W. Charles**

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