

Nations Will See

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 our scripture today Isaiah's writings focus on three (3) important areas: 1. Does God really care? 2. What's in a name? 3. How much does God love? Isaiah writes at a time when Israel has been defeated and taken into Babylonian captivity. God would soon take steps to end the Babylonian exile of Israel. Isaiah reminded the people of God's saving activity in the exodus, and this provides a basis on which they can trust the promises of God to act similarly in their present situation.

These five verses begin as a lament. Isaiah, the prophet announces God's intention to bring about the defeat of the Babylonians and the return of the exiles. In our passage, those events have taken place, but all is still not right. The Babylonians may be defeated, but the restoration and rebuilding of Jerusalem have met obstacles and delays. In our scripture, the prophet is addressing a people who have been full of hope but now must battle the deteriorating morale caused by broken dreams and crumbling faith. The people wonder if God is powerless to fulfill the promises made during the era of exile—or if God is indifferent to the plight of God's people.

Part of the power of the Bible is the good news it has to offer us who desperately need to hear such news, but the other part of the Bible's power is its ability to name the reality that we are facing. For example, a young but

wise priest visited one of her parishioners 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 is the power of our scripture for the discouraged returnees and for anyone dealing with the feeling that God has turned away and does not care. To follow the prophet's example, we need to acknowledge the reality faced by those dealing with defeat and broken dreams. God knows that we deal with loneliness, pain, fear, and disappointment.

Isaiah gives us a model for honest prayer when life is difficult and God seems distant. We dare to emulate 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 this conversation of the heart. 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.

The prophet says it is time for a naming ceremony: "you shall be called by a new name." Naming is powerful. What someone calls you defines you. In the 1970s epic television series, Alex Haley's *Roots*, a scene about naming is especially poignant. After several failed attempts to run away, the African Kunta Kinte has his foot chopped off. One would think the foot-chopping incident was the most brutal part of the scene, but no; the beating he endures is punctuated by a painful ending in which Kunta Kinte finally succumbs to the slave master's designation for him, "Toby." The glory of his heritage and

the splendor of his name disappear in that moment. His name suffers a profound death. During the showing of *Roots* and for years afterwards, many people reported being irrevocably changed by this scene.

A change in name can represent a change in character. Here 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 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.

I had lunch with Shirley Martinson last week and this is the story that she shared. A poor woman used to set on the steps of a church and although she was welcome she would not come into the church. The minister invited her to a support group. Although she didn't participate like the other women, she did come close and listen. The women always greeted each other by saying: "You are beautiful and a beloved daughter of God." The minister got a report that the woman had been beaten and raped. However when she arrived in the hospital, she heard the women saying in the mirror..."You are beautiful and a beloved daughter of God." God renames us and redefines us. Then the nations will see that we are different and beloved.

What the prophet announces 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." 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. (W. Carter Lester)

The prophet tells us that God's "steadfast love" extends beyond the known boundaries of heaven or earth. We can recognize in these verses God's view of us versus what others say about us and how they define us. God's delight over God's people is like a new and giddy husband who sings and dances for joy because of his bride, the love of his life. He is our protector and redeemer. God's joy was evidenced in Israel's return to their homeland, their sense of belonging, and their hope of never again being banned from all that was dear to them. (**Valerie Bridgeman Davis**)

The image of God's liberating love and involvement in history has fueled the imagination of many religious movements in history, including the Puritans, who understood their flight from the bondage of England, through the Atlantic waters to the promised land of New England, as a new exodus given by a providential God. Others, like African Americans, South Africans, Latin Americans, and feminists have applied the redemption of Israel out of Egyptian slavery and Babylonian captivity in their stories of liberation. They and we have understood God's love and redemption being for all, equally and without distinction. Our modern day prophet, Martin Luther King, Jr., read the scriptures, especially the Torah, calling for justice in life now; especially those scriptures that teach that God gives preferential treatment of the poor. The people of Israel were an oppressed people, captive in a foreign land. Not only would God bring about the redemption of Israel, but God provided laws to protect the most vulnerable in society: the poor, the widow, the orphan, the resident alien, and so on, and the provisions for the jubilee and Sabbath. God's love desires justice in this world, not only salvation in the next.

So, Isaiah says that things have been hard, but God will redefine Israel by acquittal and vindication. In anticipation of vindication, they were to cling to the conviction that—contrary to what the oppressors may say—they are valuable to God and do not deserve the treatment they receive. "You will be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God." We can hear in those words the self-affirmation of communities in South America or the chant "I am Somebody!" that has risen from communities in the United States.

The surprising work of God marks a common theme of Scripture. *YHWH* chose a ragged, not particularly moral, seminomadic clan as God's special people. Hannah and Mary reiterated the theme of surprising reversals of fortunes: God has "scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts"; "brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly"; "filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty". Jesus, himself born in humble conditions, often made the point. Not only did Jesus' fraternization with the marginalized of his society demonstrate God's surprising work, but parables such as the Laborers in the Vineyard, ending with "The last will be first, and the first will be last" bear witness to it also.

Clearly Isaiah's message of return from exile in reflects the long biblical tradition of God's love and promised liberation of the oppressed with the unexpected vindication of Israel that recreates them with a new identity in God's love.

The naming of the land Beulah (Married) and the image of marriage remind us that God's liberating activity grows out of God's covenant love and promise to Israel. The gods of the ancient world were often unpredictable; one could not know when favor or disfavor might be forthcoming. *YHWH*, on the other hand, imposed limits on God's own

freedom to exercise power. In the covenant, God promised steadfast love—*hesed*—as the basis of the relationship with the people, and in return the people promised to love and serve God. Judgment may come, but it will always be on the basis of the covenant—and because of the covenant, restoration will always follow. Liberation renewed Israel's relationship with God to wholeness, because God was true to covenant. **(Rick Nutt)**

Today, nations will see what God has done in our lives. We can rejoice in the Lord because we are his beloved people and in covenant with him.

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