

Included for Distinction

Isaiah 56:1-8

August 17, 2008

Before I read the Old Testament scripture for the day, let me give you a little bit of context. The book of Isaiah has three distinct movements. It was written over a long span of Jerusalem's history - a time in which Jerusalem suffered under the power of three different imperial powers: the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and the Persians. The three movements of Isaiah's prophecy are (1) words to a people of Jerusalem who are under judgment, (2) words to a people of Jerusalem who are in exile – who are dispersed as a result of Jerusalem's falling into the hands of the Empire, and finally (3) words that help the people of Jerusalem imagine their city healed, restored, and forgiven.¹

Our scripture today comes from the beginning of this third movement in Isaiah – a description of Jerusalem restored. The temple will again be filled with those who worship God. There is anticipation on the part of those who are ready to be a part of the restoration of Israel. But now the question is, who? With the faithful scattered far and wide – who will these people be who are a part of the restoration? What I invite you to notice is what groups Isaiah first mentions as he opens this third movement of the book. There are two groups: eunuchs and foreigners; two groups that were previously excluded from worship in the temple². Hear now a word from God from the 56th chapter of Isaiah:

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Thus says the Lord:

Maintain justice, do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed.

Happy is the mortal who does this, the one who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it, and refrains from doing any evil.

Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, “The Lord will surely separate me from his people”;

and do not let the eunuch say, “I am just a dry tree.” For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.

And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant –

These I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

¹ Brueggemann, Walter (*Westminster Bible Companion: Isaiah*, WJK, Louisville, 1998) pp 2-3

² Deuteronomy 23:1-7

One of my favorite authors (almost all of whom are southerners, coincidentally) is Flannery O'Connor who is, indeed, southern. In perhaps her most well-known short story, the central character is a woman named Ruby Turpin. When I read today's passage from Isaiah – about God including those on the margins in the restoration of Jerusalem I thought of Ruby Turpin. Mrs. Turpin is not what you would call a woman given to being inclusive. The story begins with Mrs. Turpin and her husband Claud showing up at the doctor's office where they are made to sit in the waiting room in order to be seen.

As Mrs. Turpin waits, we begin to see how she views the world. She knows who is important and who is not. The white-trash woman in the waiting room is not as important as the simple woman who is not as important as the nice lady with manners who is almost as important as the landowning Mrs. Turpin herself. And all of the folks in the waiting room are more important than anyone of color. Mrs. Turpin is a woman of faith – and she is sure that she sees the world the way God sees the world. Indeed, she finds comfort in the way the world is structured; she finds security in knowing who is most important in the eyes of God.

Sitting there in the waiting room – engaging the others in polite and casual conversation – Mrs. Turpin just can't help herself when she thinks about her place in God's order of things. "If its one thing I am its grateful. When I think who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got, a little of everything, a good dispositions besides, I just feel like shouting, 'Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is! It could have been different! Oh thank you, Jesus, Jesus, thank you!'"

It is usually when you are absolutely sure about things that God turns your world inside out – and that was true for Ruby Turpin. About the time she gets through thanking Jesus for her special place in the order of things, the reality that she might not know everything about the order of things hits her square in the face in the form of a book thrown by someone sitting with her in the waiting room. And then, back at home, still woozy from the blow – and troubled by the events of the day – Rubin Turpin has a vision that confirms the limits of her worldview. O'Connor describes it:

[Mrs. Turpin] lifted her head. There was only a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson and leading, like an extension of the highway, into the descending dusk. A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living

fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of colored people in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, has always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.³

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Like Mrs. Turpin, I can imagine that to many of those who had been dispersed throughout the region it would come as somewhat of a shock that these marginalized believers – these eunuchs and foreigners – would be the first ones mentioned in the restoration and re-configuration of Jerusalem. To see those who were, by the world’s standards, on the bottom of the heap lead the march back into the holy city would be difficult news to handle.

But what is important to notice is what is important to God. Yes – it is true that God is radically inclusive. Yes – it is true that God’s view of the people of God is more diverse than our view of the people of God. But being inclusive does not mean anything goes. Being inclusive does not mean not having standards or expectations. In reading this passage we see that what is most important to God about the people who are part of this restoration is not *who* they are, but instead how they act – how they respond – to being included in the people of God.

This Isaiah passage reminds us of the importance God places on sanctification – the mark of being claimed by God. Eunuchs and foreigners were on the fringes of what was considered “normal” or “acceptable” in traditional Jewish culture. This is of no consequence to God. What matters is whether the believer lives as someone who is set apart. Maintaining justice; doing what is right; keeping the Sabbath; holding fast to God’s covenant – these are the marks of someone who believes.

And so Isaiah is clear: “Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say ‘The Lord will surely separate me from his people.’ And do not let the

³ O’Connor, Flannery (*Flannery O’Connor: The Complete Stories*, “Revelation”, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1971) pp 488-509.

Eunuch say ‘I am just a dry tree.’ For this says the Lord, to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths...and hold fast my covenants...to the foreigners who love the name of the Lord and who keep the Sabbath and hold fast my covenant – these I will bring to the holy mountain.”

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It is quite normal – and expected – and politically correct to lift up inclusivity as a virtue. I certainly would not argue against understanding it as such. Yet I think it is important to root that virtue in a theological way. God is radically inclusive – and in ways that challenge us (all of us) to stretch our understanding of whom God calls to be a part of the community of faith. But God is not inclusive for the sake of inclusion – that is not the point.

God extends a radically inclusive invitation to all people in order to call us to a different way of life. A way of life that is marked by faithful decisions; a way of life that sets us apart from the values and virtues of this world; a way of life that causes us to seek justice and righteousness for people beyond ourselves; a way of life that acknowledges the fact that we do not make ourselves, but that we depend on God; a way of life that is often difficult – but always joyful. God calls us to a way of life that demonstrates a commitment to faith; a particular faith in a particular God. God is free to call whomever God wants to be a part of God’s community – but the community that God gathers is called to a particular way of living.

When Isaiah wrote this text, the way the people of God demonstrated this commitment to the faith was by the living out of the Torah – the covenant law of God; that was their mark. As disciples of Jesus Christ, the way that we demonstrate the commitment to our faith is similar. We are also called into a new way of living – loving our neighbors as ourselves; seeking justice; honoring the poor; being faithful in our relationships; extending hospitality to the stranger. Our mark is baptism. The sacrament of baptism is the sign that we are disciples of Jesus Christ; that we are different; and that we are called to live and love differently.

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You all know that I like stories; hearing them, reading them, telling them. I think theological conversations are grounded by stories –

stories are incarnational, much like our faith. So what does the radically inclusive; yet distinctive call to be a follower of Jesus Christ look like? Perhaps something like this. Indulge me as I read a story from a Presbyterian pastor named Michael Linvall who writes about his first congregation in North Haven, Minnesota – and who tells the story better than I can re-tell it:

“In the coffee house after the worship service, a taciturn, silver-haired pillar of the congregation named Angus McDowell informed me that his son, Larry, and Larry’s wife, Sherry, who live in Spokane, Washington, would be visiting for the Thanksgiving weekend. Sherry, it seems, had just presented the McDowell clan with a son, named, believe it or not, Angus Larry. However, Angus informed me, they were planning on calling him Skip, which name Skip’s grandfather spat disdainfully out of his mouth. Since they were going to be in town and since Sherry’s folks just live in Mankato and since this was going to be a big reunion, they wanted me to ‘do the baby,’ as Angus put it, next Sunday.

I got Angus out of coffee hour and into my study for an informal discussion about the integrity of the sacrament of baptism, which is what I assumed he meant by ‘doing the baby.’ I asked Angus about Larry and Sherry’s church affiliation in Spokane, explaining that it was best for a child to be baptized in the church where he would be raised. It seems, though, that they had not yet settled on a church that they liked, though they had been there nine years. I talked about the importance of the parents’ commitment to the faith and the fact that they are asked to make some rather sweeping and deep promises in the course of it all. Angus soon caught my drift: Larry and Sherry ought to find a church home out in Spokane and have Skip baptized there. Angus listened to all of this in a rather dignified and formal silence. He offered no response, much less argument. He simply rose without a word, shook my hand, and thanked me for my time. Fool that I was, I thought the matter was settled. Angus is an elder of the church and one of that dwindling breed of courtly, gentle, but inflexible stiff patriarchs of the church. In my experience, they seem to wear nothing but blue serge suits, a sort of uniform identifying them as members of an army in defense of the status quo.

True to his type, after Angus left my office, he simply spoke with all the members of the session about a special meeting to approve the baptism of Angus Larry. They had the meeting, asked me to please

stop by, and voted 9-0 in favor of the baptism. So on the morning of the Sunday after Thanksgiving, we 'did' little Angus Larry. This congregation has an odd little baptismal custom: the pastor, I was gently informed, always asks, 'Who stands with this child?' and then the whole extended family of the little one rises and remains standing for the ceremony. So, Angus Larry in my arms, I asked, 'Who stands with the child?' and up stood Angus in his blue serge suit and his wife, Minnie, and Sherry's folks from Mankato and a couple of cousins.

After church, everybody rushed home to turkey leftovers and I went back into the sanctuary to turn off the lights. A middle aged woman, dressed Salvation Army style, was sitting in the front pew with a black plastic purse on her lap. I knew her as someone who always sat on the very last pew, as close to the door as possible, but I did not know her name. She seemed at a loss for words and was hesitant about looking at me for very long. She finally said that her name was Mildred Cory and commented as to how lovely the baptism was. After another long pause she said that her daughter, Tina, had just had a baby and, well, the baby ought be baptized, shouldn't it?

I suggested that Tina and her husband should call me and we would discuss the appropriateness of baptism. Mildred hesitated again, and then catching and holding my eyes for the first time, said, 'Tina's got no husband; Tina's just eighteen and she was confirmed in this church four years ago. She used to come out for the Senior High Fellowship, but then she started to see this older boy out of high school.' She hesitated for a moment, gathered her courage, and let the rest spill out fearlessly: 'Then she got pregnant and decided to keep the baby and she wants to have it baptized here in her own church, but she's nervous to come and talk to you, Reverend. She's named the baby 'Jimmy.' I said that I would bring the request to the session for approval.

When the matter came up in the session meeting I started to explain what everyone already knew, namely that Tina was a member of the church, an unwed mother, and that I didn't know who the father was. A few questions were asked, but the Angus Larry affair had me in a feisty mood and I remarked that Tina and little Jimmy were, after all, right here in town where we could give them support. I did not have to say, 'and not in Spokane'; they all thought it. The real problem was the picture of the baptism that we all had in our heads: Tina, pimples on her chin, little Jimmy in her arms, big Jimmy long fled to Fort

Bragg, and Mildred Cory the only one who would stand when the question was asked. It hurt to think of it, but they approved it, of course. The baptism was scheduled for the last Sunday in Advent.

The church was full, as it always is the Sunday before Christmas. After the sermon, the elder who was to assist me with the baptism stood up beside me in at the baptismal font and read the words I had written on a 3x5 card: 'Tina Cory presents her son for baptism.' Down the aisle she came, nervously, briskly, smiling at me only, shaking slightly with month-old Jimmy in her arms. The scene hurt, all right, every bit as much as all knew it would. So young this mother was, and so alone. I read the opening part of the service, noting Mildred Cory sitting strangely out of place in the front pew. Then I asked, 'Who stands with this child?' I nodded at Mildred slightly to coax her to her feet. She rose slowly, looking to either side, and then returned my smile.

My eyes went back to my service book. I was just about to ask Tina the parents' questions of commitment when I became aware of movement in the pews. Angus McDowell had stood up in the blue serge suit, Minnie beside him. Then a couple of other elders stood up, then the sixth grade Sunday school teacher stood up, then a new young couple in the church stood up, and soon, before my incredulous eyes, the whole church was standing up with little Jimmy. Tina was crying, of course, and Mildred Cory was holding on the pew in front of her as though she were standing on the deck of a ship rolling in a great wind, which, in a way, she was.

The unexpectedness of this departure from the routine at first disquieted but then quieted us all, even little Jimmy. As the water touched his forehead, it seemed almost to focus his infant senses. The water rolled back into the thin wisps of baby hair, down the bridge of his nose, and onto his cheek. Every eye was on the child, who for a moment was everybody's baby."⁴

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In God's wisdom and mystery, God calls us – and all other types of people – to be a part of the great company of the saints. Who is included in that company is God's business. But more than simply

⁴ Lindvall, Michael (*Good News From North Haven: "Christmas Baptism"*, Doubleday, New York, 1991) pp. 168-175.

including us or calling us together, God desires that we follow. God desires that we stand up for the very things and people that God stands up for. That is why we are included. That is what is meant by being set-apart: it matters not who we are, or who we were – what matters is how we live in gratitude for our salvation.

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All thanks and praise be to God. Amen.