

“Answering the Call”
Sermon Title: “Called to Listen”

Preaching Text: Isaiah 62:1-5
17 January 2016
FUMC—Arlington, Texas 76011
2nd Sunday after the Epiphany

“Sometimes the appropriate response to reality is to go insane”
—Philip K. Dick (1928 - 1982), Valis

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Many Hebrew scripture scholars suggest that there were three main writers or perhaps ever groups of writers that wrote down or edited Isaiah’s prophecy. Today we possess it as a single book or scroll of our Bible. We could describe this three-fold literary organization as: **1) Trouble at Home, 2) Exile Abroad, and 3) Happy Homecoming**. These organizational pointers help us understand Israel’s history in a kind of convenient summary. While I am the first to admit this is a gross over-simplification it nonetheless helps us grasp Israel’s entire history during the prophet’s time. We might say Isaiah functions like a three-act play in which Israel: 1) breaks their covenant with Yahweh; 2) loses the Promised Land as they go into exile (or refuge); and 3) ultimately return, as a reconstituted people of God. Thus we follow something of a timeline for the book of Isaiah in its three stages:

Israel in its Homeland Rebels against God (Isaiah 1–39)

God Disperses Israel among the Nations (Isaiah 40–55)

Israel’s Elect Remnant Returns from Exile (Isaiah 56–66)

Hear our day’s lesson:

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 (Isaiah 62:1-5).

Babylon the mighty has finally fallen according to this slice of Isaiah. In fact deportations to Babylon date from about 597 BCE for the first captives and run up to and through 587/586 BCE. After Persian king Cyrus conquered Babylon in 539 BCE, exiled Jews began to return to Judah and Jerusalem. During the exile, Israel's enemies have spoiled the land. Yet, the people initially are so thrilled with returning home that despite the wrecked land, they are nonetheless overjoyed to be home. Eventually, however, reality sets in and the people begin to feel as if God no longer cares for them. The prophet has told of a new Zion—of a renewed city and people. The new Jerusalem will exhibit more faith toward God. Not only that, but God creates a new and perpetual covenant with the people.

Sometimes in Isaiah it is challenging to uncover where the voice of God ends and the voice of the prophet begins. Either way we read of the vindication or the recovery of Israel's status. The metaphors/images include: "the suddenness of dawn in the desert," that one moment is darkness and the next is light. Indeed "all the kings/nations" will see Israel's "salvation" as well as God's glory and power. We all remember when God cut a covenant with Abram, God changed his name. He was the "ancestor of a multitude of nations" (Genesis 17:5) and became Abraham: New name; new standing. After this the people thusly become God's metaphorical/allegorical spouse.

Another image concerning Israel's salvation from exile and for "becoming a light to the nations" inheres in "a burning torch." In the ancient world—and this includes Jerusalem—torches illumined dark cities. In the prophecy we may observe the lighting of Jerusalem on the Feast of Tabernacles—a festival akin to our Thanksgiving holiday. God's promise is that Israel will not surrender its harvests to their enemies as we will see if we read as far as verse 8. This event occurred as a penalty for the people's lack of faith and their rebellion against God. Theologically the bottom line from this lesson is that God will love Israel again—clearly a joyful time.

All of this is to say that a redeeming aspect of Israel's exile among the nations/gentiles is that through the absorption and intermingling of Israelite bloodlines with gentile/non-Israelites, all nations can claim Israel's covenant heritage. Repentant peoples of all nations, in other words, may renew Israel's covenant with God and secure God's lavish blessings. In a way that only God can do, God turns evil into good for those who love God and for whom God calls to God's purposes.

All this happens when the time is ripe—we call this “a Kairos moment”—a time of fulfillment moment. For Israel we could describe this as the coming back home—or the “return as a reconstituted people of God” moment. Often we measure time by “Chronos time” from which we get the world “chronological” or “calendar time or sequential time.” But there is another measure of time called “Kairos” time—a time of fulfillment or “the right or appropriate moment.” We might also say that while chronos time has quantitative quality, kairos time has a qualitative nature.

I have noted William Manchester's excellent book *American Caesar*. It is about Douglas MacArthur and I have mentioned it several times over the years. It illustrates a standard of preparedness. Not only being prepared, but the fact that sometimes we will get only one single solitary chance to do something—whether it be either a deed humble or great. MacArthur insisted on persuading individuals that none of us has unlimited time to get our act together. There are too many things that intervene in our too human well-laid plans. And well . . . you just never know. In a letter to William Allen White, MacArthur wrote:

The history of failure in war can be summed up in two words: Too late. Too late in comprehending the deadly purpose of a potential enemy; too late in realizing the mortal danger; too late in preparedness; too late in uniting all possible forces for resistance, too late in standing with one's friends (William Manchester, *American Caesar: Douglas MacArthur 1880-1964*, Little, Brown & Company, 1978, pp. 182-183).

Ten years or so ago I had only recently arrived to FUMC, Arlington. I wanted to attend a

writing workshop in Minnesota. I had planned to go for several summers. The workshop leader was Eugene Peterson who paraphrased the Bible and titled it: *The Message*. The workshop was only two weeks long, but proved to be hard to schedule. Like what we so often say about our many of our sports teams, I said one summer after another “. . . oh well, there is always next year.”

After talking to my friend Ken Carter who attended and after he told me how wonderful the writing workshop was, I finally decided to sign up. Eugene Peterson’s writing workshop was to be at the Collegeville Institute, on the campus of St. John’s College. When I called to sign up for the succeeding summer they said “Sorry, but Dr. Peterson has held his last workshop for us. He is now really retired. Perhaps you might would enjoy another workshop leader instead?”

No, I would not as I especially wanted Eugene Peterson to teach the class. As Douglas MacArthur said: “Too late.”

As we enter into the New Year 2016 may we also avail ourselves of a new beginning just as Israel had that prospect as they returned from exile in Babylon.