

Sermon

It's Fun Being a Christian!

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Our scripture today from Isaiah brings good news for Israel. It speaks of God's vindication on her behalf restoring them from exile. The Babylonians have been defeated. "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." In Isaiah 62, 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.

Turning our attention to the *right now* times...doesn't this ring true for us to some extent? The promises of a vaccine that in some respects has not lived up to the expectations we held for it. People who have been vaccinated on some cases have still caught the virus. Are we left to wonder – can we trust the hope of the next one? Or are the scientists and doctors powerless over this virus after all? And as we talked about last week – what of God? Has God become indifferent to the plight of God's people?

The first sentence of our scripture is not addressing the people – it is addressing God. The prophet is demanding that God do something about the situation. "For Zion's sake, I will not keep silent, ...until her vindication shines out like the dawn..." This is what is so great about this book of ours! When we read

these laments – these passages – we find comfort in realizing – as a people, through generations and thousands of years – these people are speaking our language! They know how we feel – they are suffering and had hopes that things would turn around as they were promised, but the timeline seems to be lagging behind here and the prophet is shouting to God – Hey God! Remember your people here? Those things you promised, well, let's get going!

It is essentially important that we come to God in honest prayer – at good times and bad. Do you ever feel guilty telling God you're frustrated, you're sick and tired of being sick and tired? Do you keep those kinds of prayers in the back of your mind so you don't offend our mighty God? Isaiah is filled with many passages that God indeed wants all of us – wants our good days and our bad days...God wants our honesty and concerns. Isaiah reminds us that in our prayers there is nothing out of bounds, nothing inappropriate. Everything belongs in our conversations with God. In fact, withholding those thoughts from God is the last thing you ever want to do. Laments are some of the most honest prayers of all. So if, like me, you're feeling a little frustrated or confused or just tired – coming to God and expressing those feelings is the most natural thing to do. I remember when I became pregnant after having a miscarriage and I wasn't praying at all – I think I was trying to avoid God because somewhere in my heart, he took my first baby away. And I just didn't want God to notice I was pregnant. That didn't work for very long and eventually it was time to come to God with my own lament – I told God how angry I was and confused and scared...and I pleaded that this baby would be born. And she was...but having that conversation allowed me to let go of my fears and confusion – and allow God back in my heart.

Now our scripture doesn't end there – it includes some really good news too. "your land shall no more be termed desolate but you shall be called My Delight is in Her...and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you." Name changes in the Old Testament offers clues in a change in relationship. 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. Like my prayer, my lament, it changed my relationship with God. And the description of a wedding – to signify the affection and love God has for God's people...a wedding. A party – our Gospel in John today is that wonderful story of Mary, Jesus' mother, telling Jesus to turn water into wine when the wine runs out at a wonderful celebration. In those days, the bride and groom celebrated the marriage not with a honeymoon but with a seven-day wedding feast at the groom's home. Well, this wedding is in big trouble because the wine has run out and Mary, mother of Jesus, recognizes this crisis for the Groom's family and instructs Jesus to gather water and save this party. Are you surprised by this act? Be honest – do you think it was proper for Mary to insist Jesus do this? It sounds a little frivolous – like a waste of a miracle really. Can't people enjoy themselves without wine after all?

In actuality, this act was incredible and speaks volumes about what God thinks of us. Truly. You know most people think of "religion" as something that happens on Sunday or specifically in a church or mosque or whatever. That's religion – what we are doing now is our religion. No...not exclusively, absolutely not. Do you think God is within the joy of a wedding celebration like the celebration at Cana? Yes – absolutely. Jesus turned water into wine to point us

to his heavenly Father, a God who loves to hear the laughter of people celebrating people. God does not want our religion to be too holy to be happy in. Jesus' ministry is filled with moments where he celebrated people – people getting married, people being healed, enjoying meals together...how many times do we call our God – the God of joy!

David Steele, a Christian pastor and author, refers to this spirit of celebration as "Cana-Grace". Chicago theologian Robert Hotchkins remarks that "Christians ought to be celebrating constantly. We ought to be preoccupied with parties, banquets, feasts, and merriment. We ought to attract people to the church quite literally by the fun there is in being a Christian."

While this time we are living through isn't much fun and has been difficult, let's remember this very important aspect of our faith – God is a God of joy – of fun, of laughter. And despite our limitations, this church is a wonderful place for fun and laughter – and in time, we will return again to celebrations, meals together, and fun. I love that our 100th Anniversary party is themed, the Bacon Bash! If that doesn't tell you this will be a fun night right off the bat!

Soon enough, someone will recognize that the wine has run out for us and our full joy will return. In the meantime, we will plan, look forward to and have hope for the days to come because we know from hundreds of years of experience, God will redeem us and that it is us God spoke of when he said, My Delight is in Her...and we can look forward to the future like a bride who waits for her wedding day..."as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you." Amen