

Isaiah 62:1-5

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. 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. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. 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. 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.

John 2:1-11:

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, “Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.” So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.” Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Last week when I returned home from our Sunday service, I caught the end of the Minnesota Vikings – Seattle Seahawks play-off football game. The score was Seattle: 10, Minnesota: 9, and Minnesota was about to kick a 27-yard field goal with 22 seconds left. The kicker had made 3 field goals earlier in the game from further away, and 98% of the time, the announcer said, these kicks are good. Minnesota was just about to win. I learned recently that there is only one lace, threaded

through 16 holes, on an official NFL game ball. When a holder sets the ball for a kicker, the rule of thumb is “laces out” meaning the holder should rotate the ball to put the lace on the side not facing the kicker, as something about the way that white strip meets the kicker’s foot can make the ball fly in unpredictable directions. Alas, at last Sunday’s game, the lacing was facing in, the kicker kicked the ball, it drifted wide left of the goal, and the Seattle Seahawks were the victors of third-coldest game in NFL history. The Viking’s kicker wept in the locker room after the game saying, “It didn’t feel good off my foot, and I kind of knew right away. You have to do better than that, and I didn’t.”

I felt for him. I imagined how hard it would be to recover from such a demoralizing loss, coming so close to bringing the team to victory, and then the feeling of devastation when it doesn’t happen. Dreams dashed.

It is from this same broken and defeated place that both of our texts begin in today’s readings. In Isaiah 62, the prophet is addressing a people who have returned from exile in Babylon, a people who have been full of hope but now must battle the deteriorating morale caused by shattered dreams as they face the restoration and rebuilding of Jerusalem, and integration with the people who had stayed back for generations and were resentful of the exiles return as a threat to their control of the land. There was also drought and famine and economic crises upon their return.

The people wonder if God is powerless to fulfill the promises made during the era of exile—or if maybe God is simply indifferent to their plight. Isaiah’s poem takes historical circumstances and transposes them between language about an ancient city and the life of a bride, using imagery of a woman cast off and abandoned, a woman named “Forsaken” and a land named “Desolate.” In ancient Israel such a woman faced life-threatening peril, because she could not survive without family to support and protect her. This is how the people of Israel see themselves upon return from exile – deserted, despised, divorced. They feel as though God has abandoned them. They feel they have lost their homeland and their identity.

I’m guessing this is how many Syrian refugees feel when they arrive after a perilous trip fleeing a war-torn homeland to be met with locked gates and closed borders: homeless, and without identity; hopes of a better life, hopes of a life redeemed, hopes of a life of wholeness, now vanished; unable to move forward, unable to go back. They feel like a discarded people, their wells and their resources run dry.

This state of emptiness is where the New Testament passage begins as well, the wedding at Cana, where the wedding guests are metaphorically forsaken and desolate because the wine has run out. Weddings in 1st century Palestine lasted for seven days, and thus, the wine running out symbolizes “party’s over” as well as poor planning and lack of resources or wealth. It’s a game changer. There is anxiety, embarrassment and shame involved. The mother of Jesus (she is not named in John’s gospel) is clearly concerned about this and considers it her responsibility to do something, so she tells Jesus, “They have no more wine.”

A few weeks ago, the reading was also about this mother-son relationship, when Jesus' parents searched for him for days before finding him in the temple. Mary was beside herself with grief, and Jesus seemed like a typical cavalier teen, unable to understand what was the big deal. That text ended by saying they went home to Nazareth, and Jesus was obedient, and Mary treasured these things in her heart.

So here we are now at Cana at the wedding, Jesus' mother tells him there is no more wine, obviously anticipating that he can and will do something about it, and he says, in essence, "So what?" This isn't exactly the obedience we would expect. He's not a teenager anymore, he's presumably thirty, but it really seems like a teenager response: "What do I care?" and this is exactly what the people of Israel feel about God's attitude in the Isaiah passage. That God could care less. That God has forsaken them. That they have been rejected, discarded, disowned.

Though Jesus says "So what?" to his mother, that "his hour has not yet come," she continues to prod him, at the same time honoring his independence and autonomy by telling the servants, "Do whatever tells you." She doesn't take his seemingly unsympathetic response as the last word because she knows he is capable of doing something.

"There is no more wine."

"What's that matter to me?"

"Do whatever he tells you."

This is where I wonder how we approach Jesus, how we approach God. Notice Jesus' mother doesn't tell him what to do. She leaves that part to him, remaining hopeful and confident that the Lord will provide. Is this what we do, when we are in need, when our wells have run dry? Or do we pray and basically tell God what to do, as if God is our personal sorcerer that can make things happen instantly on our time frame? And then when the results aren't what we expect, do we focus on the "So what?" attitude and then live in the hopeless and forlorn place where we assume that God doesn't really care, that God is absent, otherwise preoccupied, or incapable of handling our distress, unprepared to meet our needs? Do we believe the headline of the Daily News last month in response to the gun debate, "God isn't fixing this"? Or do we, like the mother of Jesus, name the situation, and then take action and trust in and participate in the solution?

The Isaiah passage begins, "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." The psalmist is not giving up hope for the fulfilled promises of restoration, neither is Jesus' mother, and neither shall we. "You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. You shall no longer 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 as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you."

This is God bringing the promise of redemption, reclamation, restoration, and recovery. I am reminded of another prophetic passage, Jeremiah 29:11: “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to prosper you, to give you a future with hope.” God desires justice and liberation for the oppressed, the poor, the marginalized, the hurting, and the needy. In anticipation of this exoneration, the oppressed must cling to the conviction that they are valuable to God.

There are six empty stone water-jars, each holding twenty to thirty gallons at the wedding at Cana. Jesus tells the servants to fill the jars with water, and they fill them to the brim. He tells them to draw some out and take it to the chief steward, the master of the feast. The steward tastes the water that had become wine, and he doesn't know where it came from. He assumes the bridegroom has saved the best for last. The servants, however, know the source of the water-turned-wine. This is Jesus' first sign, revealing his glory, and the disciples believe in him.

A fellow pastor, Rev. David Rodriguez of First Presbyterian Church of Ukiah, shared with me recently about his experience as a Navy chaplain in Kuwait in December, 2007. Part of his job was to help the troops serving in Kuwait return home for Christmas. Everyone serving overseas wants to be home with family for Christmas, and David was no exception. The 120 or so troops that came under David's care were given counseling in preparation for their return home for Christmas. They boarded the bus, took the 3-hour journey to the airport, and were unexpectedly turned away because of dust storms that prevented flights from leaving. This same thing happened on three separate occasions over the coming days as they tried to make their way home from the Middle East. When it appeared it was not going to happen after all, David held a Christmas Eve service, and as he was saying the benediction, word came in that the skies were clear and the troops could board the bus to go home. They whooped and cheered and readied to board the bus. But first, they looked back at Rev. David, who stayed behind. Pastor, aren't you coming with us? “No,” he said, “My Christmas present is knowing you are going to be home for Christmas.” He says that he never would have expected being in the military stuck in Kuwait was one of his best Christmas' ever. “God was there,” he says today.

We may find ourselves in situations we didn't expect to be in, situations where we feel stuck or defeated – personally, or corporally as a church or as a nation or a world, on the wrong side of the scoreboard or the wrong side of the bus going home. The good news today is that God is always there as the source of our relief. This is the power and glory and grace of God – that our situations can be transformed from emptiness to overflowing. That we are worthy and chosen and beloved and that God delights in us and rejoices in us as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride. Our only responsibility is to trust it and claim it.

I would like to close with the Prayer of St. Ambrose of Milan:

*Christ is everything to me.
If I have a wound that needs healing, he is the doctor.
If I have a burn with fever, he is the fountain.
If I am oppressed, he is justice.
If I need help, he is strength.
If I desire heaven, he is the way.
If I fear death, he is life.
If I am afraid of the dark, he is light.
If I seek food, he is nourishment.*

If we approach God as the source of our well-being, trusting that God is capable of handling our distress, we are likely to be surprised in ways we couldn't have imagined.

Thanks be to God.

