

Christmas Day, Old Testament, Year C

SEEKING THE FORSAKEN

Isaiah 62:6-12

Christmas Day

Analysis by Chris Repp

Upon your walls, O Jerusalem, I have posted sentinels; all day and all night they shall never be silent. You who remind the Lord, take no rest, ⁷and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it renowned throughout the earth. ⁸The Lord has sworn by his right hand and by his mighty arm: I will not again give your grain to be food for your enemies, and foreigners shall not drink the wine for which you have labored; ⁹but those who garner it shall eat it and praise the Lord, and those who gather it shall drink it in my holy courts.

¹⁰Go through, go through the gates, prepare the way for the people; build up, build up the highway, clear it of stones, lift up an ensign over the peoples. ¹¹The Lord has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to daughter Zion, "See, your salvation comes; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him."

¹²They shall be called, "The Holy People, The Redeemed of the Lord"; and you shall be called, "Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken."

DIAGNOSIS: Forsaken

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Closed Off and Disgraced

The end of the book of Isaiah is addressed to God's people in captivity in Babylon, as well as to those who remained in Judah and its devastated capital. They have been repeatedly conquered by their enemies and humiliated in the eyes of their neighbors. The road to Jerusalem is in disrepair. Those at home are cut off from the outside world, as well as their sisters and brothers in exile.

Those of us who are citizens of the current ascendant world power may have a hard time identifying with such a devastated and disgraced nation. (As a test, let's pick a couple of modern equivalents at random... oh, I don't know... shall we say Syria and Iraq?) But we certainly know the fear of sharing such a fate. We fear that we have lost our greatness, that we look weak when compared to the good old days when we saved the world from fascism. We fear that foreigners will overrun us, that they will not assimilate to be like us, but will change our way of life. "Our" country is being taken over by "them," and we want to "take it back" before it's too late to prevent its total collapse.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Seeking Other Gods

How did the people of Israel and then Judah end up like this? The answer given in the earlier chapters of Isaiah is that they turned away from trusting in God and put their faith in the things that nations usually put their faith in: the might of their armies, alliances with other nations, the promises of their neighbors to supplement the projection of their power against their enemies. They have also turned away from God by abandoning justice and righteousness within their own borders, taking advantage of the weak instead of caring for them, neglecting the widow and the orphan.

I will leave it to the reader to judge whether in our own time and place we are not also chasing after other gods and the promises of this world: market-driven economies, the fortunes of the few being built on the misfortunes of the many, the trust in violence and the threat of violence both at home and abroad, the tribal instincts that pit races, cultures, and religions against each other, instincts that have historically (ironically?) led to the fascism we are so proud to have (temporarily?) conquered.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Forsaken (by God)

Because of the people's unfaithfulness, God also turned away from them. God no longer accepted their prayers and their sacrifices (see, for example, Isaiah 1:10ff). More than that, God actively opposed them—became their enemy.

Again, I will leave it to the reader to discern whether in our own time and place God might not have turned against us, and

whether the things we put our trust in (Luther would call them gods) might be leading us to our doom—both because their promises are inherently illusory and also because God is actively at work to oppose us. (And indeed why should God *not* oppose us?)

PROGNOSIS: Sought Out

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Sought Out (by God)

The turning point for God's people comes abruptly, unexpectedly, and entirely at God's initiative (Isaiah 35). There is no hint that the people have done anything to incline God to their cause, nothing to indicate that they have even begun to turn their hearts toward God. As at the beginning, God creates again *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). The desert blooms, the blind see, the deaf hear. "See your salvation comes!"

So too for us salvation comes, a light in our darkness. All of humankind—not merely a single family thereof—is hallowed by God's presence among us as one of us in Jesus Christ. God in him is not against us but for us. And God-with-us (and for us), Jesus, charts a different course for us, a new and truer way of life. Paradoxically, by his death he breaks the stranglehold of sin, death, and the power of evil on our lives.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Seeking God

The prophet's words evoke trust in God's promise, and the hearts of God's people are turned back to God. They begin rebuilding the highway that connects them to the rest of the world.

Reconciled to God in Jesus Christ, animated by our baptismal vocation, we too begin to reach out in compassion and love to the world around us, removing the obstacles of hatred, suspicion, and fear that impede our relationship with others, together with the rubble of this world's broken promises.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Open Up and Famous

The Holy City is opened once again, and God's people are free to return from the ends of the earth.

But in Jesus Christ God has made all the families of the earth God's people. And Jesus himself is the Way, God's holy highway that leads to genuine life for all people, just as God has always intended. As the body of Christ, we famously embody his radical welcome. Among us there are no foreigners, and all are fed and praise the Lord.