

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

GOD'S REFUGEES

Isaiah 35:3-7

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost Analysis by Ron Starenko

*3Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
4Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
"Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you."
5Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
6then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
7the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.*

DIAGNOSIS: The Shattered Story

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Dislocated*

Look around us! We are different races, colors, nationalities, our parents coming from different places seeking a new life, a new world. In one way or another, we are all refugees, exiles, and we all share a shattered history. We all bear the scars of war, lost family, dislocation. In our daily struggles we indeed become aware that the world is an alien place, a wilderness where we wander blindly, deaf to anything positive, feeble and tentative, on the verge of despair. Even in the midst of our plenty and our escapes and our isolation from the horrors we view on our TVs, we live in a world, even our “promised land,” which often looks and feels more like a wasteland. In dismay, we lament over our “weak hands,” our “feeble knees,” and worst of all, our “fearful hearts” (vv. 3-4), a fragmented world.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Despairing*

As we look deeper into what is happening behind this Old Testament lesson, we see the nation of Israel in despair, a shattered story. Their exile years in Babylon oppressive, their hopes and dreams withering, their identity eroding, their world a “burning sand,” and a “thirsty ground, “the haunt of jackals” (v. 7), they are a people without a country, aliens. Even though we live every day in “a land of milk and honey,” still we wander, aliens with no place to go, bewildered, beguiled by false gods which cannot heal, as someone has put it most graphically, “like dogs returning to their vomit,” a sign that life’s meaning has been shattered.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Done In*

Simply fleeing from one country to another is hardly an answer, as nations come and go, as we continue to live a shattered story, defeat always just around the corner. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews reminds us that seeking a city, a

Shangrila (13:14b), something of our own making that never has lasting value. We are done in, not only by an enemy rule, as in the case of Israel, but also sacked by God who in one way or another turns us over to our misguided ventures, personal and national, a shattering, as we are doomed to wander, crumbling from without and from within.

PROGNOSIS: The Salvation Story

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : Repatriated

End of story? No! There is another story, from the beginning and even before, always in the heart of God, the salvation story, how exiles would get a new life, like the Syrophoenician woman (Matt. 15:21-28), and the Roman centurion's slave (Matt.8:5-13), and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (John 4:1-44), all of them, foreigners, strangers, outcasts, deserving to be exiled, yet welcomed into the salvation story. Jesus knew that he came not only for the lost sheep of the house of Israel, but also for the exiles of this world. For them, and for us also—"strangers and foreigners...seeking a homeland...a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (Heb.11:13-16), Jesus himself was exiled, driven out not only by those who crucified him because he welcomed them all, but also driven into the far country of a lost humanity that deserved to be cast out forever. His mission was to repatriate us all, bring us refugees back home, turning the shattering story into the salvation story. Isaiah spelled it out, prophesying, "Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you" (v. 4b), saving us not only from our enemies, but also from divine judgment. Jesus' death on the cross, a shattering, God suffering away all alienation, all enmity, all estrangement, inaugurating a new way of being and living, salvation history now underway.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : Rejuvenated

God's refugees, we are rejuvenated to continue our pilgrim journey. We have been given a faith and a hope by the Holy Spirit's presence, by Jesus' presence, much like our ancestors 3000 years ago, the exiled, to move forward as those who have a future, to discover our identity as those whose blind eyes have been opened, whose deaf ears become unstopped, with new abilities to "leap like deer" and "sing for joy" (v. 6). The waters have broken forth in our wilderness, as we have been baptized into Jesus, our refuge and strength for our living of each day. We haven't arrived yet when "Death...mourning and crying and pain will be no more" (Rev. 21:4b), still, we are on our way, refugees heading home.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Reclaiming Others along the Way*

Furthermore, as we travel, members of the salvation story, saying Yes to the morning, we have strength to stand and a heart to return to life even when the world seems to be coming down around our ears. Remembering who we are, we come to the aid of those, our own company, and also all other strangers and foreigners, exiles of our world, reclaiming especially those who are shattered, the blind, the deaf, the lame, the dumb, the weak, the fearful, the hungry, the thirsty, the disabled, the poor. God's refugees we all are! And it takes one to know one, so that we might become who Jesus is, the Refugee for all refugees, as the salvation story beats on.