

Fifth Sunday in Lent, Old Testament, Year C

HOPE FOR THE HOMELESS

Isaiah 43:16-21

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Analysis by Bill White

16 Thus says the Lord,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
17 who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
18 Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
19 I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.

20 The wild animals will honor me,
the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
21 the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.”

DIAGNOSIS: Exiled from God

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Homeless

God's Chosen People are being punished. Because of their rebellion against God, because of their stiff-necked hard-heartedness, because they have been following their own devices and turning to other gods, the LORD has allowed Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian army to crush Judah, destroy Jerusalem and Solomon's Temple, and march the survivors into exile. So now the Israelites find themselves captives in a foreign land with no way home.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Hopeless

Even worse, these Israelites have little or no hope of freedom and a return home. Their underlying problem is revealed in verse 18. All they seem to do is remember the former things and consider the things of old. What are these “former things” and

“things of old”? Commentators say there are at least two possibilities. Either they are remembering God’s delivering the Chosen People from bondage in Egypt and wondering why God has not delivered them again, or they are remembering the unfaithfulness of their ancestors in the wilderness and down through the centuries and believe they too are to be counted among the company of the unfaithful who will live out their lives being punished. In either case, they are without hope.

Imagine their ponderings: “God delivered our ancestors mightily from bondage in Egypt. If we really are the Chosen People, why have we not also been delivered?” “Perhaps the God of Moses is not the greatest, most powerful of all the gods? Why else would we be in these circumstances?” “Maybe God is not really in control.” “No, God is in control, but our sins are so severe God will not forgive us! God will not rescue us. This is our punishment!” “Considering what we’ve done, we haven’t got a prayer.” “Yes, it all seems hopeless.”

The Israelites have little or no hope because they have little or no faith—certainly no real fear, love and trust in the one, true God.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Condemned

Worse still, clinging only to the faithless remembrances of their rebellious, sinful behavior that has led to their exile, the Israelites have no hope of ever being redeemed of God. They are condemned under the judgment of God’s Law upon their thoughts, words, and deeds. It is hopeless. Not only do they

not have a way back to Jerusalem, they have no way back to God.

PROGNOSIS: Brought Back to God

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): A New Way

But Israel's God is the Lord who delivered their ancestors from bondage in Egypt (vv. 16-17), and they are God's Chosen People. Into their situation Isaiah brings the word of the Lord: "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert" (v. 19). And yes, God is about to do an unexpected and new thing in that God will use a non-Israelite, Cyrus, to make a way to bring them back to their ancestral, earthly home.

As unexpected and "new" as this is, it is not the ultimate "new thing" God is doing. All people, including the Chosen People, will continue to sin. They will continue to be judged and condemned under God's Law.

No, the ultimate new thing God is about to do is the Incarnation. God in the person of Jesus Christ is coming not only for the Chosen People, but for all who by sin are exiled from God. Jesus will take the "condemned" judgment under God's Law upon himself and give his life on the cross of Good Friday. But by his life, death on the cross, glorious resurrection, and ascension (return home), Jesus will fulfill for all time the Law's demands and he will trump the powers of sin, evil, and death. A new way back to God is now possible for those

condemned by God's Law. A new way home is now possible for those exiled from God by sin. A new way: the Gospel of Jesus the Christ, crucified and risen.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): A New Hope

It is this new thing—the Gospel of Jesus the Christ—that offers hope to the hopeless. By the power of the Holy Spirit working through Word and sacrament, Jesus comes to exiled, hopeless sinners with an incredible offer. Jesus says in effect, “Have I got a deal for you. Let me have your hopelessness and in exchange I will give you real hope. Let me have your condemnation and in exchange I will judge you not guilty. Let me have your sin and I will give you my righteousness. Let me have your weak, misguided faith and I will give you real faith in the Gospel. Let me have your death and in exchange I will give you eternal life. Is it a deal?” Hopelessness is replaced by a new hope grounded in the promises of Christ!

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): A New Home

Moreover, this new thing—this new hope in the promises of Christ—fills the believers with the blessed assurance that the God who created them has now recreated them in Christ Jesus, e.g., the God who formed them has now re-formed them in Christ Jesus (v. 21a). God through Christ has made a way back home to God for the believer. God did this for a specific reason, namely, that they might declare God's praise (v. 21b). Hence, believers in Christ are at home in the Lord, living lives of faithful praise to God.