

First Sunday after Christmas

A SAVIOR FOR A WORLD IN DISTRESS

Isaiah 63:7-9

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Analysis by Ron Starenko

*7I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord,
the praiseworthy acts of the Lord,
because of all that the Lord has done for us,
and the great favor to the house of Israel
that he has shown them according to his mercy,
according to the abundance of his steadfast love.
8For he said, "Surely they are my people,
children who will not deal falsely";
and he became their savior
9in all their distress.
It was no messenger or angel
but his presence that saved them;
in his love and in his pity he redeemed them;
he lifted them up and carried them
all the days of old.*

DIAGNOSIS: Crushed (Isa. 63:6)

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

The Twelve Days of Christmas, liturgically speaking, go downhill. Whatever we celebrated as Christmas, whether secular or sacred, fantasy or piety, did not necessarily prepare us for what is coming, even for what is already here. December 26, for

example, commemorates the stoning of Stephen, one of the early Christians to be martyred. December 28 marks the slaughter of the Holy Innocents, referred to in the gospel lesson for today, as does the gospel lesson for the Epiphany of our Lord, January 6. To our dismay, perhaps, all of the lessons for today seem out of sync from what we generally associate with Christmas. In fact, they push our noses into a world in distress, whether it's the prophet Isaiah writing about the calamities falling upon the children of Israel for their faithlessness, or the power of death that holds the world in slavery, according to the Hebrews lesson, or the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt to escape murderous Herod, described by Matthew. Furthermore, these ghastly events are happening in our world today. As we speak, there is genocide, infanticide, flights from warring despots, over-crowded refugee camps, martyrdom, in short, worldwide distress (v. 8).

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

Americans think they are insulated from what is happening around us, feeling safe and secure. The fact is, we are hurting, almost to the point of despair. We are a divided nation, not knowing how to justify a war, not knowing how to end it. The stock market is nervous, trembling, in fact, as the economy shows signs of serious decline. If CNN were to take poll of the mood in our world today, the glass would be less than half empty. We are in terror of what might happen in a volatile world, a sure sign that we "deal falsely" (v. 8), neither trusting God's promise through it all, nor having the ability to pledge ourselves to any kind of obedience or integrity.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Collapse*

Is it safe to say that we are on the brink of collapse? There are enough precedents for this in history, biblical history in particular, to serve as a warning. Eight centuries before Jesus the prophet Isaiah gave warning after warning to the kingdoms of

Israel and Judah because of their idolatry and immorality, predicted their collapse and scattering, summed up in the Old Testament lesson for today with the word “distress” (v. 9). The prophet speaks of his people being trampled (Isa. 63:6). How could this happen to God’s chosen, God’s favored (v. 7), delivered from bondage in Egypt, returned from exile more than once, about to bite the dust again when Jerusalem is sacked, God’s people crushed yet another time? Could that happen to us, a nation that boasts of being a savior? Clearly, no one escapes the consequences of human folly and unbelief. We need no convincing that we live in a violent world, as nations rise and fall, self-destructing, even the self-proclaimed saviors. The day will come when we too will run for our lives in vain, unable to escape the judgment of a just God.

PROGNOSIS: Favored (v. 7)

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Lifted Up* (v. 9)

Jesus and his family ran for their lives, though not to escape the distress that was bound to come, but rather, certainly for Jesus, to face it at another time and provide an eternal escape. Surprisingly, the gospel lesson about the flight to Egypt is good news. Hounded as we are by menacing powers we cannot escape, including the power of God’s wrath, God nevertheless, as all the prophets made clear, answers back in grace. The prophet Isaiah had a saving word to bring to his people, foretelling how God comes among us, in to a violent world, not simply as a messenger or an angel (v. 9), but as Savior in our distress (v. 8). The “presence” (v. 9) that saves us would be none other than our Lord Jesus Christ, in a ministry that was downhill all the way, distressed from his birth to his death, in suffering and shame, finally the Resurrected One, to “free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death” (Heb. 2:15), for the living of a new kind of life amid turbulent times. Jesus not only saves us from death and destruction, but

also from God and for God, the Savior-God he is, who, like a shepherd, wills to lift us and to carry us home on his shoulders (v. 9).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Faithful*

Wrestling with that word, to believe it, to identify with it, is what it will take to turn us around, to prepare us for a future, a world “where no more will the sound of weeping be heard in it, or a cry of distress. No more shall there be an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime” (Isa. 65:19-20). Here the prophet announces good news of what is to come, echoed also in the Apocalypse of John (Rev. 21:4), what we know to be fulfilled in the vulnerable Infant, who grew up to be the Crucified and Resurrected One, alone able to transform us with a “kindness (that) is meant to lead (us) to repentance” (Rom. 2:4), to turn us into faithful people, a chosen people, changed into the image of the One whose “great favor” (v. 7) can save us all.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *In Mission*

Favored we are, then, for no other reason than to be a redeemed people with a mission like our Lord, to announce the presence of a Savior for a world in distress, that Jesus, the Holy Innocent, did not die in vain, rising as Lord and King. He described his—and our—ministry in his first sermon, anointed “to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Isa. 61:1-2). We truly celebrate Christmas when we live out the vulnerability of Jesus, as his body in the world, faithful in hope and love, in word and work, a savior people for a world in distress.