

Second Sunday after Epiphany, Old Testament, Year C

A SHIFT IN STATUS

Isaiah 62:1-5

Second Sunday after the Epiphany

Analysis by Bruce K. Modahl

¹For 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. ²The 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. ³You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. ⁴You 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. ⁵For 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.

DIAGNOSIS: Losing Your Good Name

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Humiliated

King Josiah died in battle. First the Egyptians and then the Babylonians humiliated the kinglets who followed him. Babylonian armies came once and brought Judah to her knees. They came again and destroyed David's city and Solomon's temple. The people of Judah listened to the glee the Edomites and other surrounding nations took in their downfall. The victors force marched the pride of Israel into exile. Psalm 137 gives us a sense of their humiliation as they were ridiculed by the victors. "By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'" The reader can hear the mockery in their request.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Unrighteous

In our text the prophet calls out twice for the vindication of the nation. "I will not rest until her vindication shines out... The nations shall see your vindication." The word used is more often translated righteous. "I will not rest until her righteousness shines out... The nations shall see your righteousness." The prophet's words can only mean the nation is unrighteous. Her unrighteousness rests in apostasy, the same place as always. They placed their trust in the promise God made through Isaiah to King Hezekiah that Jerusalem would not fall to the Assyrian horde "for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David" (2 Kings 19:33-34; Isaiah 37:33-35). They took that particular promise and projected it into all time and circumstances. They used the promise as license to explore what good things they might get from limping after other gods. They used the promise as license for injustice in the courts and to oppress those of low degree.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Under God's Wrath

The land that was called Promised, God now names Desolate. The people called Chosen, God names Forsaken. No doubt they called themselves that.

PROGNOSIS: Gifted with New Names

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Under God's Judgment

The purpose of judgment is to set things right. The only way to vindicate the people (to make them righteous) is for God to take everything into his own hands. Our text proclaims "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest until her righteousness shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch (check out the opening to chapter 60). The nations shall see your righteousness."

God bestows new names. "No longer shall you be termed Forsaken, but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her (Hephzibah). Your land shall no more be termed Desolate. Your land shall be called Married (Beulah). The bestowal of new names signals a change in status. God changes their status from unrighteous to righteous. This reversal points us further into God's story.

There is another who called himself Forsaken. As I have written, the only way to vindicate us, to make us righteous, is for God

to take things into his own hands. In Jesus God took into his hands the nails of our violence and injustice. As he hung from the cross on the desolate terrain of Calvary he took our name Forsaken. He took in his hands the gravestone that we cannot lift. He threw it aside in order to step out as the first fruit of Beulah land.

In exchange for our bad name he gives us his own. In baptism God names us brothers and sisters to Jesus and therefore the Father's own sons and daughters. God names us Christ's Own. Christian is our name. In exchange for our violence he gives us peace. For our sin he bestows forgiveness. For death he gives life. For a landscape bordered by death he promises us a land called Married in which he is the bridegroom and we his bride. In the Lord's Supper he gives us an appetizer from the heavenly wedding banquet. Yes, I know the metaphors collide. We are Jesus' sisters and brothers and also his bride? Our language on this side of Beulah land strains to declare the glory of what God does in Jesus Christ.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Turning to the Lord

The context of Isaiah 61:1 through 62:12 is the repentance of the remnant. At first I was inclined to place the mourning, ashes, faint spirits and broken hearts of Isaiah 61:1-5 at in Step 1. The mourning, ashes, and faint spirits are outward signs, but they are outward signs of those very internal broken hearts. They are signs of the work of the Holy Spirit breaking their hard or hopeless hearts and calling them to rely on God's promises. The Holy Spirit calls them to renewed faith and gathers them as the faithful remnant in the same way the Holy

Spirit calls us to faith and gathers us as the Church. Baptism is the outward sign of the work of the Holy Spirit turning us to Christ in whom we have our righteousness.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Righteous Living

God declares us righteous through faith in Jesus. We call it forensic justification. This good news gets only better. God is not content with declaration. God will make us what God declares us to be, namely, righteous. (See Robert Jenson's *Systematic Theology Volume 2*, chapter 30, "Anima Ecclesiastica.") Jenson has only to quote Luther to make the claim (p. 297). In hearing the Gospel we are, Jenson writes, "being formed in the very virtues God commands" (p. 295). Given that we are at the same time saint and sinner "Christ must curb my remaining egocentric longings [which] he will do through my own agency, through my self-discipline and resolve." There is no room here for boasting except in Christ.

Any increase we might mark in righteous living is not that of progress as "in every day and in every way we get better and better." Increase in our new life in Christ is marked not by progress but by return. We return to the baptismal font where we died with Christ and rose with him to new life. Every act of repentance and forgiveness is a return to the font (pp. 297-298).