

# Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, Old Testament, Year C

GOD MAKES AND KEEPS HIS PROMISES

Isaiah 66:10-14

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 9)

Analysis by Timothy Hoyer

10Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her— 11that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast; that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious bosom. 12For thus says the LORD: I will extend prosperity to her like a river, and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream; and you shall nurse and be carried on her arm, and dandled on her knees. 13As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem. 14You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice; your bodies shall flourish like the grass; and it shall be known that the hand of the LORD is with his servants, and his indignation is against his enemies.

DIAGNOSIS: We Tragically Insist on Our Own Way

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Jerusalem Is Empty  
People mourn Jerusalem, that the city is empty, the people forced away into exile, and that God was against the people, and that the place where God came to dwell with his people—the Temple—was destroyed.

Any Christian at any time can feel empty, that God's mercy for them is far away, even that God is against them. A tragedy in one's neighborhood can make Christians feel scared, alone, full

of grief, without hope, exiled from God's protection.

## Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): People's Hearts Are Empty

But people do not just mourn that Jerusalem is empty, they mourn that God has forsaken the people of Jerusalem. In earlier verses Isaiah spoke God's word of judgment, "They did what was evil in my eyes" (v. 4). The people did not fear, love, and trust in God. When God, out of love, called his people, "no one answered" (v. 4). "They have chosen their own ways, and their soul delights in their abominations" (v. 3). That is, the people believe they know better than God. They like making their own decisions—their freedom to determine what is valuable. They are blind to the possibility that they could choose otherwise—blind to God's ways and what God has commanded.

When Christians feel exiled from God's protection, they may ask, "What did we do to deserve this?" That is a question that comes from faith in the law of retribution—that we get rewarded for doing good, and that we get punished for doing wrong. But to ask the question of why punishment is happening, is to question and doubt God. Christians also choose their own ways, thinking they know better than God. Christians are also blind to the possibility that they have done wrong. They don't confess their wrong; they only protest their exile—what did we do to deserve this? Surely we did nothing.

## Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Death Is Not Empty

But when Israel chooses its own way instead of choosing God's way, they choose against God, preferring a false god to the God who has freed them from slavery. They go against God. They are smug, self-confident, saying they have no need to listen to God. So God states that God will choose affliction for such people (v. 4). If the people insist on their own way, then God will insist on his own way (as Luther states in his lectures on

Isaiah in Luther's Works, Volume 17.402). God's alien way was to send them away into exile—a death sentence.

When Christians insist on their own way, they do not fear God. They will fear that which is going wrong—the tragedy, their own disease, that maybe they will lose what they own. Their hearts are thus owned by a fear that is not a fear of God. To go against God, can only end in death.

#### PROGNOSIS: God Insists on His Own Way of Mercy

##### Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): God Promises New Life

But now God makes a promise: Rejoice! “Trembling hearts that are ready to fall into hell, such are the palaces of God” (LW 17.398). As God's people felt they were nothing there in exile, God promised to return his people to Jerusalem—to be nourished by his presence there, and that nations would also come to worship God in Jerusalem. No longer were God's people exiled from God. Now God was for them, promising to bring them home and once again to feed them and give them life.

God says to Christians today in the midst of their lives and fears, “Rejoice!” Rejoice because that death, that exile from God, has been ended by Jesus crucified and risen from death. Jesus ends that death for us, promising to raise us to new life with God forever. Death is no longer the permanent exile in the land of dust, but is now God's way of freeing us from evil, from this world, and from our inability to trust God when retribution happens.

##### Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (External Solution): God Fills His People's Hearts

God justly sent his people into exile to stop all the wickedness done by them. But God did not destroy them; instead, through a faithful remnant, God's promise of a Savior would be preserved.

God promised to comfort his people, to comfort their consciences with forgiveness, to console them and declare that all is now restored between God and God's people. God would even do this in Jerusalem, their home, in the Messiah who died and rose there. By this promised comfort, God was giving his people faith in him so that they trusted him more than they disdained or despaired of their exile.

The way of retribution has been replaced by Jesus giving all people his new way of mercy. God through Jesus will only comfort people with forgiveness, will comfort people with peace, with comfort them by declaring them right and good, not because of what they have done or will do, but because of what Christ has done for us by his dying and rising. God's justification for declaring us right and good is Jesus' death and resurrection.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Jerusalem Will Be Full

By this new faith in God's promises to bring them home to Jerusalem, to have nations bring their wealth to Jerusalem, God's people had their weeping turned into joy. Now they lived, not in the despair of exile, but in faith in God's promises. Even in exile they could now rejoice, and rejoice again when the promise was kept and the people were actually back in Jerusalem. The people could now encourage one another, exhort each other to lift up their heads, to start packing up belongings for their trip home, and not live as if their exile was all they had.

Comforted by Jesus' death and rising, brought home to God by the presence of Jesus, Christians get to rejoice even in the midst of the events that would otherwise tell them they are exiled from God. The tragedy, the disease, the retribution are not all that is. Now there is Jesus' mercy, and living in that mercy now, we are no longer exiled from God, but are children of God, given life by God through Jesus. No longer do we feel that

retribution is all there is, now we trust that Jesus' mercy is with us even in our tragedies and diseases. Even when sick, we rejoice. Even when congregations struggle, they rejoice. Even as we die, we rejoice, for we have more than what we see, more than this exile, we have Christ and his promise to keep us with God, with him—right through death to eternal life with God. Also, our trust in God's mercy for us, we get to live under God's mercy management instead of pursuing our own ways, or making "their god their belly" (Luther). God's promises spoken by Isaiah gave people faith, but it was not those promises that were for all people, that would destroy death, would replace the law with forgiveness, and overcome sin with faith in the one would die and rise again. The promises of Isaiah were for the sake of THE PROMISE of eternal life with God for the sake of Jesus who would die and rise from death. This exile from Jerusalem is but a sign of our exile from God's presence. The return is but a sign of the new life God would give all people by returning them to him for the sake of Jesus. So we rejoice.