

# Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

**I TOLD YOU SO!**

**Isaiah 44:6-8**

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**Analysis by Steven E. Albertin**

*6Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel,  
and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts:  
I am the first and I am the last;  
besides me there is no god.*

*7Who is like me? Let them proclaim it,  
let them declare and set it forth before me.  
Who has announced from of old the things to come?  
Let them tell us what is yet to be.*

*8Do not fear, or be afraid;  
have I not told you from of old and declared it?  
You are my witnesses!  
Is there any god besides me?  
There is no other rock; I know not one.*

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Defenseless**

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Speak Up!**

Israel's world had fallen apart. Everything that had reassured her of her chosen status and the faithfulness of her God (the temple, the monarchy and the land) had been destroyed and possessed by the Babylonian hordes. The Babylonian gods had made Israel's god look weak and puny. Marduk had won. Yahweh had been

defeated and disappeared into the desert. After languishing in exile for more than two generations, the rise of Cyrus and the invasion of the Persians destroyed the hegemony of the Babylonians. Israel began to trickle back to her homeland. The exile was over but the road back would be long and difficult. Israel's faith had been tested to the core. Could she still trust in a god who seemed so weak in the face of other gods? Could she still count on Yahweh after having suffered so much? In a world filled with many gods each offering its particular promise and blessing, why should Israel still count on Yahweh?

Such was the context of this word from Second Isaiah (ca. 547-540 BCE). The exile had put Yahweh on trial. Yahweh's claims had been tested and Yahweh came up short. Now Yahweh needed to speak up and make himself believable. Why should the God of Israel be more worthy of their hearts than any of the myriad of other gods that populated the religious landscape of the late 6th century BCE? Yahweh needed to speak up and make his case!

This ancient world seems distant and remote. We hardly seem to live in a world filled with gods like Marduk and an endless number of other deities each claiming to enrich our lives in exchange for our loyalty and obedience. Yet, it is a world that is more like ours than we would like to admit. As Luther's explanation of the First Commandment reminds us, everyone has a god. Everyone has something to which their heart clings, something that gives their life meaning and purpose, something that provides a reason for getting out of bed every morning and something to which we offer our time, talent, and treasure. Though these gods may be of our own making, their hold on us can be powerful. Their promises are diverse and many, each claiming to offer us some benefit in exchange for our loyalty and commitment. As we sort their claims, we demand that they speak up and make their case: "Why should we believe in you?".... (For a glimpse of whatever the "you" might be . . . look at the latest

ads on your computer or the apps on your phone and take your pick.) ... “Speak up! Make your case. What do you have to offer me?”

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Afraid***

We may want to sound like confident consumers shopping for a deal, but in truth we are desperate for a reason to keep on going. Like the desperate Israelites returning from exile who were afraid that the gods (let alone Yahweh) might let them down, we need to have “a reason to believe,” a reason to get out of bed in the morning and go to work and a reason to think that our lives matter. Everyone has a god or is in search of one (or more) that will deliver what we want. Everyone needs a “rock,” a place to stand, something solid to which we can cling in the midst of a sea of relentless change and uncertainty. We live lives that are “incurably theolatrous,” shamelessly giving our hearts to whatever god promises us the best deal, regardless of how much we piously pretend to be free of such polytheistic impulses.

The idolatrous pandering against which the prophets raged is not merely the quaint relic of Israel’s ancient past. It is very much alive in our supposedly enlightened search for a meaningful life. We chase after whatever god promises to meet our latest fancy.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Silence***

We clamor for reasons to believe—whether in the gods that flood the media with their endless, empty promises, or in the one God of Israel who is the first, the last, and besides (which) there is no god (v. 6b). Even God must justify himself and meet our demands for credibility. We fear that our search will end up empty; that all will go for naught and that finally no one will answer our demands masquerading as questions. Our fears are confirmed when we, like Israel, must suffer in our exiles of

pain and loss. We demand explanations that are actually complaints against the God who has not lived up to our definition of godliness. However, God will not bend to our arrogance. God refuses to justify himself. We get no answers, only silence and the rejection that our conceit deserves. Against such a God, we are defenseless.

## **PROGNOSIS: Fearless**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** : *Thus Says the Lord*

BUT...just when our babbling has petered out and all that remains is the deadly silence of a life without hope and a God who has abandoned us to exile, surprisingly and inexplicably the silence is broken. This time God breaks the silence and speaks. God takes the initiative. God restarts the conversation as Second Isaiah declares, "Thus says the Lord."

Sounding like a prosecuting attorney, God puts the other gods on trial and exposes their weakness and futility. Unlike other gods, the God of Israel makes promises and keeps them. Other gods claim to control "things to come" and "tell us what is yet to be," only to flounder and fail. They are not worthy of our faith. They are not even gods. However, not this God! This God says, "I told you so!" This God says, "I am the first and the last; besides me there is no god." Only Yahweh is the "rock" that endures. Mocking their empty promises, Yahweh dares the gods to live up their claims knowing that they will fail: "Who is like me? Let them proclaim it, let them declare and set it forth before me." God knows that they will not and cannot. But God knows that God does...as God has always done. "I told you so." By identifying himself as "The LORD [Yahweh], the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts" (v. 6a), God invites a frightened and discouraged Israel to recall God's mighty acts of deliverance in the past such as the Exodus from

Egypt, the rise of the monarchy from the house of David and now their current return from Babylon as signs that this God always keeps his promises. No other god keeps promises like this one. “Is there any god besides me?” (v. 8b)—if by a god you mean someone who always keeps his promises and someone whom you can count on no matter what. Only this god meets that definition.

God’s gracious breaking of the silence reaches its dramatic climax in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Just as Second Isaiah promised, God in Jesus breaks the silence for outcasts who had long since given up, resigned themselves to living out their lives in exile and condemned to routines without value or meaning. Jesus’ gracious intervention interrupts the silence, reverses the judgment and gives hope to all those who had long given up. Jesus goes to the cross becoming an exile himself. He will not let them go. Condemned to the same desperate silence, God is determined to not let his love disappear into the grave. Therefore, God breaks the silence and raises Jesus “on the third day” showing to all that “besides me there is no god.” To be a god, a real god, means that no one or nothing can silence you. To be a real god means that you have the last word about anything and everything. When Jesus rose from the dead, God defiantly shows a cynical and disbelieving world that not even death could thwart the love of this God. Was that not what God had always promised? Now it is clear. “I told you so!”

#### **Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Confident***

Therefore, Second Isaiah declares on behalf of the God that is like no other, “Do no fear or be afraid” (v. 8a). We no longer have to fear that no one listens. We no longer need fear that our lives have no meaning or purpose. We are confident of a future that is in the gracious hands of God. This God has repeatedly rescued his people from exile and assured his people that their lives matter. We need not be surprised because that

is what God has always done. "I told you so."

Therefore, we can patiently live in exile, endure the silences and be hopeful that God will speak his promises and restore our confidence in the future. We can face the uncertainties of the future fearless of what might happen. Where other gods fail, the God whom we meet in Christ will never cease to surprise those who thought they had no future. In Word and sacrament Christ continues to break the silence and assure us on behalf of God, "You can trust my promise. I told you so."

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Speaking Up***

Buoyed by such words of hope, unafraid of the scorn of others and confident of what the future holds, the exiles cannot but speak up about the God who is theirs. They cannot help but proclaim in word and deed the truth about this God who is like no other. Where others have given up on the future and struggle to fill only their own pockets, they declare a different future where all are welcomed by the love of God with lives and generosity and kindness. They see through the false claims and phony promises of all the things that would pass themselves off as gods; they are free from the idolatrous demands of the enslaving ideologies of the right and left. They rejoice in the truth of this God who never tires of assuring the world of his love. "I told you so...and I will never stop telling you of that blessed future."