

Arise, Shine for Your Savior Has Come

Deutero-Isaiah Chapters 40 to 66

December 14, 2011

Readings for the day:

Isaiah:

Chapter 62

Chapter 63: 1-6

Chapter 63: 7-19

God's "splendid impatience"

When it comes to justice, God can't wait. This is what theologians have called God's "splendid impatience," and in expressing it, prophets have variously imagined the urgency of a woman in labor (42:14) or the exquisite anticipation of a young man anxious to be with his bride (62:5). This impatience is also revealed as God breaking the divine silence in the world. God's silence has cropped up elsewhere in the Isaiah prophecies (42:14). When you consider what happens when God speaks—the most famous examples being the first chapters of Genesis and John's gospel respectively—it's obvious that an utterance of God is something to which attention should be paid.

In this case, when God chooses to speak, vindication arrives "like the dawn" and "a burning torch." This is an apocalyptic event, so it won't need to be repeated. Once the Lord has spoken, the nation will never be called Forsaken or Desolate anymore, but "My Delight Is in Her" and "Married" as well as "The Holy People, the Redeemed of the Lord.. .Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken." Eighth-century prophet Hosea first considered Israel as espoused by God (2:16-20), so this is another example of the Isaiah school repurposing earlier ideas. While we're given no clues to the historical circumstances that might have caused this outburst of divine speech, we know this generation was fraught with the apparent failure of the Jerusalem repatriation to solve all the nation's problems. The citizens may be having a bout of less-than-splendid impatience with the progress of the restored nation. Most of us can remember a time when we wished God would move faster.

This Week at Home:

We will be doing these three readings at our Wednesday sessions but to really get to know Isaiah I suggest you reflect on each of these readings on a separate day at home.

Day 1 "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent...." ISAIAH 62:1

Read Isaiah Chapter 62

Reflection: Under what circumstances have I been impatient with the pace of progress?

Prayer Starter: Source of all justice, your outrage is the only pure expression of anger we know. Cleanse our hearts of the anger with an agenda that leads us to sin.

Day 2

"I trod them in my anger and trampled them in my wrath." ISAIAH 63:3

Read Isaiah, chapter 63: 1-6

Reflection: Are there groups of people in the past or the present that I am content to condemn?

Prayer Starter: Just and merciful God, the judgment of the world is in your hands. Teach us to forgo passing judgment on our fellow human beings.

Day 3

"You are our Father; Our Redeemer is your ancient name." Isa. 63:16

Read Isaiah, chapter 63: 7-19

Reflection: Do I ever review all that God has done for me in the past when I am doubtful of or baffled by his care for me in the present? Do I still turn to him as my Father in all circumstances?

Prayer starter: My Father in heaven, I turn to you in trust because you are indeed my Father, concerned for me as your child. Do not let me ever doubt or forget your care for me.

The grapes of wrath (Isaiah 63: 1-6)

Earlier we explored the gravitas behind glory: its literal weightiness as well as its sober bestowal of importance on the figure crowned with it. In "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," God's glory is described in martial tones: "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord/He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored." Military victories are often acclaimed as glorious occasions, but the actual scene on the battlefield is one of graphic violence. The Isaiah prophecy that inspired this anthem is among the most brutal portrayals of God in Scripture. The divine robes are soaked in the blood of God's enemies. The wrathful God-image remains powerful in the popular religious imagination, especially for those who reject the biblical tradition. How can a good God behave this vengefully?

It helps to consider who's being trampled so ruthlessly: Edom, the nation that biblical writers love to hate. Edomites are the "Nazis" of the Bible, scholar Carroll Stuhlmueller suggests, transcending their historical identity to become stereotypes of pure evil. The prophet Malachi explains why: The brothers Esau and Jacob are timeless rivals, and so the children of Esau become "the people with whom the Lord is angry forever" (Mal 1:4). Historically, Edom and Israel were opposed several times, most poignantly when Jerusalem fell in 587 B.C. Edom took advantage of the exiles' misfortune to loot the city. The relentless imaginary destruction of Edom therefore becomes an apocalyptic sign of God's final victory over the world's darkness.

Isaiah, chapter 63

Chapter 63 is made up of two sections. Yesterday's first six verses, were a dialogue describing the destruction of Edom, a kingdom to the southeast of Jerusalem. After Jerusalem was conquered by Babylon, the Edomites plundered its helpless survivors. Hence the depth of hatred of the Israelites towards Edom, a vehemence that comes through in these verses.

A psalm begins with verse 7 of chapter 63, a psalm that continues through the end of chapter 64. It is a psalm of lament for the destruction of Jerusalem yet also a prayer of confidence in God. It begins by recounting the glorious deeds of God in the past, chiefly the exodus from Egypt (verse 11), and implores God to come once again to the aid of his people. It is noteworthy that God is addressed as Father (verse 16) by his people who are his son (verse 8). Although Jesus constantly referred to God as his and our Father, such was very rarely done in the Old Testament. Yet here, despite affliction by enemies (verse 18), God's people turn to him as their Father.

We are reminded of the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane: his agony was real agony, but yet he prayed to God as his Abba, his loving Father. This psalm is similar. God's people are suffering and do not understand why he is not quicker to rescue them, but they still turn to him with confidence as their Father.