

God's Deliverance

I delight in the Christmas season, the music, decorations, parties and special church services. But my greatest



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joy comes from the incomparable event of our Savior's birth.

The world, with all its flash and appeal to physical enjoyment, cannot cover up the divisions within our society, solve the injustice and bigotry that colors our words or heal the sickness of our soul. The first candle we light in the Advent wreath today represents hope found only in God's grace.

Isaiah was commissioned by God to bring a message of hope to a people who willfully chose to ignore their own saga – of God seeking them, guiding them on a pathway that would offer the world God's love and blessing them as God's special people. But Isaiah 51 is the total opposite to all the promises of God: the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, exile to the pagan city of Babylon, and overwhelmed by religious, cultural and political influences. The children of Abraham did what every generation seems to repeat. They played the game of "religious chance," choosing personal sovereignty over God, success over peace of heart and mind and selfishness over God's love. The old prophet said it all: "All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way: but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him" (Is.53:6). In the midst of our selfishness and lostness, God intervenes to say he loves us. Of course that makes no sense – it is love!

In the worldly grandeur and depredation of Babylon, the prophet points the miserable exiles to "Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the Lord ... look to the rock from which you were hewn and the quarry from which you were dug ... look to Abraham your father and Sarah who bore you" (vv. 1-2). This is not a call to moral reform or a return to rituals, but a reaffirmation of who

and whose they are: God's people. They had a remarkable history, a saga of nomadic wanderings, slavery, idolatry, selfishness and a nationalism that treated God as little more than a good luck charm. What was in the past could not be ignored, but it could be absolved by God if Israel would face the truth and seek God anew. But confession and repentance are never easy for us mortals.

The symptoms of Israel's suffering are common to all humanity. In matters of success and happiness we think in terms of luck. But in real life the ultimate forces are God's sovereignty and providence.

In the midnight darkness of Babylon, Isaiah directs his people to "lift up your eyes to the heavens" (v. 6), and they will hear God saying, "My salvation will be forever, and my deliverance will never be ended" (v. 7). Can this be true? You can choose to continue the same miserable life pattern or you can choose the option of God, which brought hope and blessings in the past.

Isaiah offers the potential blessings of God:

- "For the Lord will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places" (v. 3).
- "A teaching will go out from me, and my justice for a light to the peoples" (v. 4).
- "I will bring my deliverance swiftly, my salvation has gone out and my arms will rule the peoples." (v. 5).

In contrast to the military and political power of Babylon, God is unlimited by time or national boundaries. The exiles knew the Hebrew Scriptures and the history of God's faithfulness to them. Was Babylon more powerful than God? Could any king or political movement substitute for God? The Babylonians were religious, but their gods were shallow, self-serving used by politicians to support government causes.

Isaiah was calling Israel away from the darkness of a ruling empire to the grace of the only God who can change

Formations

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Scripture: Isaiah 51:1-8

a persons' heart as well as their world. The old nursery rhyme is true: "All the king's horses and all the king's men, couldn't put Humpty together again." It was true in Isaiah's time and it is true in our time: politicians and armies can never replace God, even when they try to hide behind religious words.

Israel was discouraged, as we all are, when it seems we are trapped in a world where God has been lost in politics and social ideas of self-importance. Babylon was the victor that had vanquished "God's chosen people." Israel was lost in a foreign place where it seemed darkness ruled. But Isaiah said to the children of God: "Do not fear the reproach of others, and do not be dismayed when they revile you" (v. 7). "For the moth will eat them up like a garment, and the worm will eat them like wool, but my deliverance will be forever, and my salvation to all generations" (v. 8).

There is no pretense on the part of Isaiah. He lived in the heartache of his countrymen and felt their loneliness and despair. But life and God are not trapped in the moment or heartache. Time moves on as does life. Each person has to decide how to see life, how to respond, how to believe. The darkness of Babylon seemed final. Had God finally given up on Israel? Had they gone too far?

Of course God was not done! Read the Old Testament stories. Time after time it seemed the people of God were finished, but whether it was foreign threats, the failure of moral or religious leadership within, or the rise of false religions – no matter the cause – God always sought out his people. Babylon is part of the faith saga, the story of God's grace from the Garden of Eden to the cross of Calvary. Advent and Christmas are all about the God who loves us beyond our failures and foolishness, the God who will not be denied by empires or lies. Light the first candle of Advent and celebrate the promise of God's deliverance.