

12 (1985)

Psalm 147:12-20
Isaiah 61:10 — 62:3
Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-18
John 1:1-18

Second Sundays after Christmas are rare, and by this time of the Christmas season pastors may be straining to state the Christmas gospel in a fresh and pertinent way. Some, of course, may elect to observe the Epiphany of our Lord a day early, but for those who want to preach on the Christmas theme one more time the following comments on the First Lesson are appended.

Verse 10 of Isaiah 61 is an individual psalm of thanksgiving in which the personified community — those who mourn in Zion (61:3) — praises God for clothing it with salvation and righteousness. Salvation and righteousness are often used in parallel, complementary lines, and each word deserves to be recovered from centuries of theological overlay. Salvation connotes victory, such as liberty for captives and comfort for mourners (62:1-2). Righteousness means first of all God's faithfulness to his relationship to us, then all those actions which demonstrate his faithfulness — promise, incarnation, death and resurrection — and then the result of that faithfulness in our lives, our experience of salvation. Righteousness is not God's justice or his meeting the requirements of being God; righteousness is his surprising trump card. On the second Sunday after Christmas, with a Gospel from John 1, his righteousness is the Word made flesh.

In verse 11 the reliability of the promising God is underscored. Just as gardens sustain plant growth, so God makes his righteousness spring forth and bud for our deliverance — his righteousness leads to

our state of righteousness. Echoing back to God are the praises of his people; they are the natural instincts of those born anew. All this happens for and on behalf of the nations. Our personal experience of salvation is always also for the benefit of all of God's children. What happens to us is a sign of hope for the nations. Mission and witness are inescapable.

Chapter 62:1 promises that God will never keep silent when his people are endangered, however much he may seem to be silent from our perspective (64:12). The Silent Night was actually a raucous night for his Word or promise sounded forth in unmistakable clarity. That Word would not take failure for an answer. God would not rest content until his people's vindication (= righteousness!) and salvation would be as bright as a thousand suns. God would be so faithful (righteous) to us so that the effect of that righteousness might be empirically manifest in our lives.

Nations and kings — shades of Epiphany! — will see our righteousness and our glory. The RSV translated "righteousness" here correctly as vindication. It is not that the nations see our good works and glorify God although elsewhere that too has its place (Matthew 5:16). What the movers and shakers (the kings and the nations) see is the transforming outcome of God's faithfulness in our lives. We are the best PR for God. Our glory is derivative and our salvation a gift. The nations will want to know where we got such a gift, and so give us the chance to tell them.

Verse 3 does not promise the people of God that they will receive crowns, but that they will be crowns. We are the victory trophies in God's collection. We are the signs that his Word is true and that his Son came for good effect.

His Word bespeaks us righteous. His Mouth grants us a new name (verse 2). Names always are marks of new status. Abram and Sarai became Abraham and Sarah when they were made participants in God's everlasting covenant. We were made Christians when our names were given in Baptism. Now that Word and Mouth made flesh tell a surprising truth about us. We are not the Forsaken and the Desolate (verse 4). The real truth about us — in God's eyes — is that our

name, our identity, is Hephzibah (verse 4). What a wonderful sentence name: "My delight is in her." No wonder the community wants to praise (61:10). No wonder we sing, "My heart for very joy doth leap."

Our land is renamed Beulah. That's an old fashioned name today. Perhaps not one church in a hundred has a Beulah on its rolls. But we are all Beulah's, we are all part of a marriage-like relationship to God. Just as newly-weds rejoice over one another, so God will rejoice over his Beulah, over us. Our Christmas hymns help us to express our joy: "Let Our Gladness Have No End." But the real good news of this season is that God gets a kick out of making us his own (verse 5).

That's why, on the rare Second Sunday after Christmas, we jointly confess: I will greatly rejoice in the Lord (61:10).

Ralph W. Klein

Christ Seminary-Seminex

Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago