



A NEW BEGINNING WITH A NEW NAME

Isaiah 62:1-5

January 14, 2007

INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE

In the days after Christmas, many of us have to deal with what people call the post-Christmas blues. The Scripture I am about to read took place centuries before the birth of Jesus, but it deals with blues of another kind, what I will call the post-exile blues. The people of Israel had been exiled in Babylon for more than a generation, but then were allowed to go home to Jerusalem. Coming home to Jerusalem was exciting but it was also depressing; the neglected city was in ruins. Doubtless some of them wondered what kind of God would set them up for such deep disappointment. But among them was a prophet who kept hope alive among them, a prophet who kept pleading with God, a prophet who would not keep silent... (read Isaiah 62:1-5 KJV)

The prophet foresaw a new beginning between God and God's people, in which the people would be transformed into righteousness, and God would give God's people a new name for a new beginning. The City of Jerusalem would no longer be called forsaken or desolate. God would call the city Hephzibah, meaning "My Delight Is in Her," and the Lord would give the city a new name, Beulah, meaning, "Married." And God would cherish God's renewed Jerusalem like a groom cherishes his new bride. C Austin Miles wrote a great gospel song based on this passage, which our Choir will sing now: Beulah Land.

MESSAGE

When I was a boy, the time came for me to make the move from Swift Creek Elementary School to Cary Junior High School. In my thirteen year old excitement, I saw moving to a new school as a chance to make a new beginning, maybe even to take on a new identity. So I resolved that I would stop being "Douglas Murray." From now on I would be "Doug Murray." I was no longer just a little kid. I was Doug. If I wasn't cool yet, at least I was on the verge of coolness. I was Doug: a new name, for a new beginning.

I'm not the only one that's ever done that. Recently a whole phone company changed its name from "Sprint" to "Embarq." In the Irish band U2, Bono was originally Paul David Hewson. And when the artist-formerly-known-as Prince-but-now-he's-Prince-again leads the halftime show for the Super Bowl, somebody back in Minnesota will remember the old days when he was known by his full name, Prince Rogers Nelson.

Middle school boys and phone companies and rock stars are not the only ones who change names. Look in the Bible: Abram and Sarai became Abraham and Sarah. Their grandson Jacob had a name change too. Jacob originally meant “trickster.” But after he wrestled with a mysterious angelic/divine figure, he received a new name, “Israel,” meaning, “strives with God.” When Jesus came along and met up with a fisherman named Simon, Jesus sized him up and said “From now on I’ll call you Peter,” which means Rocky. Later, Saul the persecutor and jailor of Christians became Paul the great Christian missionary who spent a lot of time in jail.

In the Bible, these name changes were not done on a whim; they were full of significance. These name changes expressed what had happened to them as a result of their encounters with God. God had reversed their past. God had changed their status. Because of what God had done, they had made a new beginning in life. Because of how God had changed them, they got new names to go along with their new beginnings.

Isaiah 62 is part of the story of people who were waiting for a new beginning. It’s a story for all people who are desperate for a new beginning in their lives but have been disappointed more than once. As I said, they had been exiled to Babylon and had been waiting to come back home to Jerusalem. After 50 years, a new king let them go home. But when they got home to Jerusalem, what should have been a dream come true was turning into a nightmare. The Temple was in ruins. The court system was corrupt. The worship services were not much better. The leadership was often poor. They were home, but so what?

Has that not happened to you? I mentioned having the post-Christmas blues, but that would be mild compared to what some of you have gone through in some part of your lives. You start a new school, or a new job, or you get married, or some other great new chapter in your life. Your expectations are high. But then, expectations are unmet, and disillusion sets in. And in the back of your mind you wonder: where is God? Won’t God help this next part of my life and this next dream of my life come true? Or have I just been set up for another disappointment?

That was just where the people were in Jerusalem. But among them was a prophet who would not quit. He would not quit calling his people to keep the faith. He also would not quit calling on God to keep his promises. To his people and his God, the prophet kept “pleading the promises of God:” *(Page Kelley, Broadman Bible Commentary, page 363)*

For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent,
And for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest,
Until her vindication shines out like the dawn. (Isaiah 62:1a)

Before his people and his God, the prophet offered two great word-pictures, two great images of God’s promises coming true. **THE FIRST IMAGE-PROMISE WAS IN THE FORM OF LIGHT:**

I will not rest,
 Until her vindication shines out like the dawn,
 And her salvation like a burning torch. (Isaiah 62:1b)

His people would still have their new beginning. It will come like the glow in the east while the rest of the world is still sleeping. It will come like a burning torch in a dark, dark cave. Yes, the darkness still surrounds us, but the light will come, said the prophet.

Can you believe that for yourself? In whatever darkness is surrounding you, can you see any light? In all your attempts to make a new beginning in your own life, can you believe that someday your past will be reversed and your present will turn toward the future God wills for you?

Let's be careful here not to offer false hope. I'm not speaking of "it's always darkest before the dawn." I'm not speaking of "everything's going to be all right." No, sometimes some things go wrong. What I'm speaking of is hope that is honest about all the darkness in the world, and yet still hopes against hope, as the writer of Hebrews put it. I'm speaking of someone like Paul, who was so brutally honest about the darkness out there that once he wrote in 2 Corinthians that "...we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself," and yet held out that

He who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us;
 on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again. (2 Corinthians 1:10)

The prophet in the ruins of Jerusalem, and Paul in the chains of a prison, would not rest until "vindication shines out like the dawn," and "salvation like a burning torch."

ALONG WITH THE IMAGE-PROMISE OF LIGHT, THE PROPHET HELD UP A SECOND IMAGE OF HOPE FOR HIS PEOPLE AND HIS CITY; IT WAS THE IMAGE OF A ROYAL CROWN:

You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord,
 and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. (Isaiah 62:4)

Part of old Jerusalem was perched on a hill that came to be called Zion. As the prophet looked up that hill, it was disappointing to see nothing but broken and crumbling walls. But the prophet trusted that someday those walls would be rebuilt, until the walls and towers circling the top of that hill looked from a distance like a crown. And then the prophet imagined the Lord God Almighty taking that crown of the walled City of Jerusalem and holding it gently in the palms of God's hand, admiring his special treasure, the City of Jerusalem, God's crown. The prophet kept the faith that ruined, broken-down Jerusalem would become once again the royal diadem of God.

The same with how you and I see yourselves. Life has a way of wearing us down, until one day we may look in the mirror and see someone who is just falling apart.

Sometimes you can actually see this in the face of someone who had led a hard life. The lines and wrinkles and complexion look like someone 20 years older. Other times you cannot see such wear on the outside, but it is there on the inside nevertheless. We look at ourselves, we look at what the miles and the years have done to us, we trace the lines of our sins and our life blunders and missed opportunities, and we are convinced we are looking at the ruined shell of a man or woman.

But the prophet says, no, there is a transformation coming. By the grace and forgiveness of God, by our faith to trust in God until we turn and change our life direction, what was once the ruined shell of a person can be rebuilt. The grace and forgiveness of God can rebuild a person. And then God will take you in the palms of God's hands and hold you with pride as if God were holding his royal crown.

AND, SAYS THE PROPHET TO HIS CRUMBLING CITY, GOD WILL CALL YOU A NEW NAME. Once Jerusalem was called desolate, but God will call the city by a new name, which means "my delight is in her." Once Jerusalem was called forsaken, but God will call the land "married."

What the prophet is saying is that a people and a city that had been cast off and rejected will become as precious to God as a new bride is to a husband. No longer forsaken, but married. The Hebrew word behind "married" is be'oolah. Or, we say, "Beulah." That's where the name Beulah comes from. Not many people name their daughters Beulah nowadays, preferring names like "Heather" and "Jordan," and "Whitney." But when you understand the meaning of it, Beulah is a beautiful name. Beulah. It means a woman who is in an ideal state. Beulah. It means someone who is cherished and loved.

No, you don't hear of many girls named Beulah nowadays, but sometimes, you might hear some gospel group singing of Beulah Land. And when they do, they're singing of the promise to crumbling Jerusalem, that it will one day be restored. And they're singing of the promise to all us crumbling, ruined people, that one day we will be restored too. For one day, we will realize that God cherishes us as much as God cherished Jerusalem. One day, by the forgiving grace of God, we will know that God delights in us, treasures us, loves us.

One day, we'll be living on the mountain, underneath a cloudless sky.
 One day, we'll be drinking at the fountain that never shall run dry.
 One day, we'll be feasting on the manna from a bountiful supply.
 For one day, we'll be dwelling in Beulah land.

-- Douglas E. Murray