



BEULAH LAND

January 24, 2010; the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 62:1-5

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After 50 years of captivity in Babylon, the exiles have come home to holy Jerusalem, their hope and their dream. What they find is not a dream come true, but a nightmare of devastated homes and Temple and no prospects of work. Into this dire situation, the prophet Isaiah speaks this word from God:

Isaiah 62:1-5

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, for Jerusalem's sake I will not remain quiet, till her righteousness shines out like the dawn, her salvation like a blazing torch. ² The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow. ³ You will be a crown of splendor in the LORD's hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God. ⁴ No longer will they name you "Forsaken" or call your land "Desolate." But you will be called Hephzibah, and your land Beulah; for the LORD will take delight in you, and your land will be married. ⁵ As a young man marries a maiden, so will your sons marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.

Deanna lives a simple life in the Virginia mountains. Toward the close of Barbara Kingsolver's novel, *Prodigal Summer*, a massive storm rips through Deanna's mountain hideaway. Kingsolver tells the story this way: "Every instinct told her to make a run for it, but there was nowhere to go. . . . The cold wind hurt her teeth and her eyes. . . . The solid trees she'd believed in were bending unbelievably, breaking and losing limbs. Trunks cracked like gunshots, one after another. . . . *There is no safety here*, they seemed to be saying. . . . This forest was the one thing she'd always been sure of, and it was ripping apart like a haystack. Any of these massive trunks could crush her between one heartbeat and the next. She turned her face against the wall of the cabin. . . . unaware that she would never again be herself alone – that *solitude* was the faultiest of human presumptions" (*Prodigal Summer*, 434).

Years ago, I spent a short term of my seminary life in Haiti. Since the earthquake, I have wondered what happened to those I met who already lived on the precipice of disaster. For the survivors, I have wondered how they can move one foot forward and deal with such devastation. As I have watched way too much TV coverage of Haiti, I have heard the echo of the forest to Deanna – *there is no safety here*.

Since the earthquake, I have also thought of our distant kin returning home from Babylon only to discover Jerusalem in ruins. I have thought of ole Isaiah trying to get the attention of those who for too long had lived off a diet of despair. Starting with a famine that forces them to look for food in Egypt, only to move from prominent citizens to mud-slinging slaves, Moses then serves as their travel guide into the desert and then Joshua marches them into what proves to be the not-so- promising land. Not long after, the occasional judge gives way to the cry for a king and after one miserable failed experiment with monarchy, young David gives up a slingshot for a crown.

But even then ruin and despair are not far behind. Son Solomon drops the ball miserably and the nation splits in two, with the north falling to an angry Assyria, while the south glories in its bull markets, political deals, and high standard of living only to rot within before collapsing into the grips of Babylon.

Fifty years pass and Cyrus the Persian tells the Jews to go home. Grandparents tell grandchildren all the lore about Jerusalem, rabbis chant alleluias, and the remnant of David's exiled children finally head home. But, ruin and despair await them on their arrival. Cyrus was no fool. He sent this company of complainers back to a city that looked like an earthquake had just struck. With an initial rush of enthusiasm, rebuilding the Temple starts and the coals of hope survive, but as the economy fails, enthusiasm evaporates, leaving them with the worst kind of fatigue. They look around at all the devastation and conclude that once again God has left them desolate, abandoned, to live in ruin and despair in unholy solitude.

Talk about a tough congregation to preach a sermon, Isaiah preaches words that must have sounded surreal. He hand delivers them this promise: "You will be called by a new name which the Lord will announce . . . No more will you be called Forsaken, no more will your land be called Desolate, but you will be named Hephzibah and your land Beulah; for the Lord will take delight in you and to him your land will be linked in wedlock."

Isaiah tells them that due to no faithfulness on their part, no badges of good citizenship, no miraculous transformation of beasts into beauties, God has chosen to see beyond their sin and give them a new name, Hephzibah or "My delight is in her." And, no longer are they to be known among nations as the Divorced, but as Beulah, a Hebrew word for married. God and God's people are on speaking terms again, says Isaiah, and it is God who has saved the marriage.

This good news will continue long after Isaiah and will be spoken on a trash heap outside Jerusalem, where a body will be flung across a wooden beam and because of it, Christians will be foolish enough to rejoice that God has also forgiven us and given us a new name that reminds us we are not alone and assures us that in God's service there is not only safety, but meaning. And, because God has forgiven and claimed us, you and I are also invited to live in Beulah land.

Now, that is some nice prophet or preacher talk, but why would any one of us want to live there? Times may be tough, but they are not catastrophic. We're not living in Haiti or in a refugee camp or in a cave in the Afghan mountains. We live in "the land of the free and the home of the brave." We

have all that we really need. We have our homes or shelter, a good meal awaiting us downstairs, a car or MARTA card to take us where we are going. We don't need a religious nut telling us that God has forgiven us. What's to forgive?! We don't need a pushy prophet to tell us that God has restored our lives. What's to restore?!

After all, we are people of the Manifest Destiny, we will let God know when we need God. As for now, we are just fine. We've got our DVR, DVD, GPS, IRA, 401K. We are walking acronyms of confidence living a far cry from the ruin and despair of Haiti or violent storm in the forest in Kingsolver's novel or the ancient devastation of Jerusalem. We not only deserve a break today, we make our own breaks and don't need God to rebuild anything. We will do that for ourselves.

And yet despite all that American bravado, why do so many people living in the "land of the free" feel as if they are enslaved to debt and family pressure and work ladders to climb? Why do so many who have so much feel like they are living in ruin and despair? Why do so many of people living in the "home of the brave" need a pill to get us going in the morning, a pill to keep our anxiety in check during the day, and another pill to put us asleep at night? Why is suicide on such an alarming rise in America? Why do those surrounded by so many feel absolutely alone?

I don't know about you, but I am ready to give Isaiah another hearing. I have come to really enjoy living in Atlanta, but I want to make my home in Beulah land, far from anxieties that blind and greed that overwhelms and ambition that numbs the soul, close to a God who delights in you and me, who gives us a reason for our living and never abandons us in our dying. I want to make my home in Beulah land.

I say I want to live in Beulah land, but it is only rarely that I step foot there. It's a beautiful land, but I do not always have a good eye for beauty. It's a peace-filled land, but too often I am poised for a fight. It's a redemptive land, but too often I want to wallow in bitterness. In Beulah land, you and I will not find a pot of gold or a genie who will grant our every wish. What we will find is a God who knows us better than we know ourselves and even so still says to you and me, "Come back home."

I don't know about you, but Beulah land is where I want to live. And, if you look back on those choice moments when your heart absolutely marveled at the searing grace of God, you will see the way there.

AMEN