

2nd Sunday of Epiphany
Racial and Intercultural Justice Sunday

January 20, 2019

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And Not Keep Silent

Acts 18:5-11

Isaiah 62:1-5



"Frieze of the Prophets" John Singer Sargent, Boston Public library

"The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people but the silence over that by the good people."

"I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word."

"Let us be dissatisfied for those who live on the outskirts of hope"

Martin Luther King, Jr.

I will not keep silent... [Until] your land shall no more be called Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight. – Isaiah 62:1, 4

Ninety years ago last Tuesday a baby was born who would one day change the world. Not me! I'm only 85 (lol). He was the second child and first son of an Atlanta clergyman. His father's name was Michael, so they named him Michael, Jr.

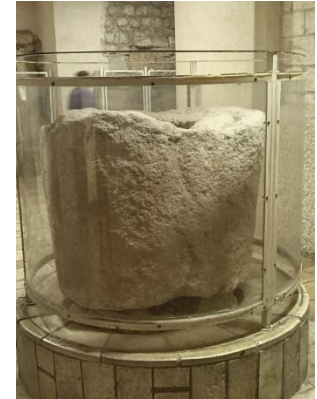
According to the historian Taylor Branch, when Michael, Jr. was 5 years old, his father was selected to be part of a worldwide delegation of Baptist ministers visiting Europe and the Holy Land. Michael, Sr. waved good-bye to his church and his family and boarded an ocean liner bound for France. From Paris he took a train to Rome, then he crossed the Mediterranean to Tunisia, then to Cairo, until finally he arrived in Palestine. He visited the Biblical sites before returning to Europe for a follow-up meeting in Berlin. It was 1934, and Michael was black.

The Berlin conference bristled with excitement over all they had learned about past and present history. Michael and the other ministers heard rumors about the fiery new German leader named Adolf Hitler. They visited historic sites in the land of their religious heritage. They saw where the German monk, Martin Luther, changed the way the Western world understands and worships God, how Luther stood up against corruption in the church and government in his day. Michael was so inspired that he returned home to Atlanta and announced that he was changing his name. He would no longer be called Michael but Martin, Martin Luther. For consistency, he also changed the name of his eldest son. Michael, Jr became Martin Luther King, Jr.

Although he was very young when his parents changed his name, Martin Luther King, Jr. would later say his name change was one of the most important events of his life; it became a statement of identity and expectation.¹

He had good reason for thinking that. Think of all the name changes that took place in the Bible: God changed Abrams name to Abraham, Sarai became Sarah. God changed Jacob to Israel. Jesus renamed Simon, Peter; Saul became Paul. Each of those name changes brought a new opportunity and an awesome responsibility.

Our names tell a story; at some level they define us. My family's name, DeWyngaert, is Frisian, not Flemish as we had previously thought. You can find out nearly anything online these days. Our name means "of the vineyard" which at some level explains the family's inclination toward fine wines...and barely average wines (lol). This past fall, when our Israel/Palestine travel group visited Cana in Galilee, where Jesus performed his first miracle, we saw some containers that were used in Jesus' day for storing water for the Jewish rites of purification. It would have been in stone jars like these that Jesus turned water to fine wine.



Our names mean a great deal to us.

Scientists say that our brains constantly listen for the sound of our names even when we are speaking or sleeping. You can be talking with someone when someone else across the room says your name, and if they are within earshot, you will stop whatever you are saying or doing at the sound of your name. That's the way our brains work. When you are asleep your sleeping brain filters out all kinds of other sounds, but your brain listens for the sound of your own name, even when you are asleep...kind of like Alexa!

So when the prophet Isaiah announces that he is going to change Israel's name from Forsaken to Delight, from Desolate to Married; everyone listened.

This is the 62nd chapter of Isaiah, beginning at verse 1:

*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,
and her salvation like a burning torch.
The nations shall see your vindication,
and all the kings your glory;
and you shall be called by a new name
that the mouth of the Lord will give.
You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord,
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.
You shall no more be called Forsaken,
and your land shall no more be named Desolate;
instead you shall be named My Delight Is in Her,
and your land will be called Married;*

*for the Lord delights in you,
and your land shall be married.
For as a young man marries a young woman,
so shall your Builder marry you,
and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
so shall your God rejoice over you.*

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Some of the Jews were old enough to remember seeing their precious city destroyed. Others had only heard the stories from their parents and grandparents about being snatched from their homes and carted off to Babylon. What was left of Judah became a Babylonian province. Those who were left had to do humiliating things to survive. The metaphor of a marriage is a good one here. For 50 years the people of Judah had been separated, alienated, even divorced, you could say, divorced from one another and their God.

Now they had come home. Isaiah declared that they were about to get a new name: Their city would never again be called The Forsaken City or Desolate Land. Instead it would be called City of God's Delight.

That name change was a defining moment for the refugees.

Some returned to Israel because they wanted to, but most came back because they were ordered to go -- Cyrus, the king of Persia conquered Babylon in 539BC. He did not believe in forced relocations. He thought that the Israelites would be more valuable economically if Jerusalem again became a thriving capital city. So many of them returned.

Those who had been separated had to learn to live together. Think of the stories you've heard from refugees here in this country-- stories of crime and violence in their own countries, how at times they had nearly died from lack of food and clean water, families separated. That was just some of what the Israelites faced during the reconstruction. Life was hard in Jerusalem. It isn't surprising that they called themselves Despised by God and Forsaken.

It's important to know how they got into that situation in the first place.

Back before all this happened, before the war and the deportation, they had had 2 warring political parties. They could get nothing done. I don't know if they ever shut down the government, but I do know that the internal divisions got so bad that it was easy for a foreign army to conquer them. They had already used up all their strength and energy fighting with each other...name calling. I wonder if they called each other Snowflakes, Hacks, Extremists, Trolls, or Nutjobs.

Names matter.

As always God sent a prophet to lead them. God bless him; we call him 3rd Isaiah. He was the prophet of the reconstruction, part of the school, and probably the family of the first Isaiah, the one who had warned them that this would happen if they didn't straighten up and quit their bickering. The first Isaiah told them that they needed to come together and close the gap between the rich and the poor. He tried to tell them what would happen if they continued to behave like pagans, ignoring God's lawⁱⁱ. The Big 10. The Commandments. These are still God's word for today. Can you say them?

1. No other gods. That means you can't worship the Orioles or your children. Stay strong, worship God alone.
2. No graven images. That means don't put your total trust in anything you can see and touch – not books or fitness or bank balances, investments, weapons, not security systems. God alone is your true security.
3. Honor God's name. Don't use God name as a cuss word, of course. Don't swear falsely using God's name. But more than that, we are to praise and honor God's name...worship God's name.
4. Keep the Sabbath. No fair skipping church to go to the Raven's game. God comes first. Worship.
5. Honor your parents. Not just your biological parents but all your elders. Respect and care for them.
6. No killing.
7. Honor your marriage vows.
8. No stealing.
9. Tell the truth.
10. Appreciate what you have. Don't be jealous and wanting what other people have.

If you do this, Isaiah said, if you exercise justice for the poor, welcome the stranger, care for the widows and orphans, love God with your whole heart and your neighbor as yourself -- then you will flourish. If you live like unbelievers, if you break these commandments, then your name will be Forsaken and your land will be Desolate. Those are the choices.

Sadly we know that Israel chose not to honor God's commandments. The worst they could imagine -- happened.

Here's the important thing to remember – In God's way of doing things, no one and nothing is irredeemable. No place is God forsaken. No matter how bleak and desolate things become, there's always the possibility of new life. God will make a way out of no way.

In order to see God's possibilities and experience God's redemption, there are two things Israel had to do. They are the same two things we have to do: We have to stick with God and we have to stick with each other, stay together.

Now I know that today it's fashionable to say, "I'm not religious" or, "There are too many hypocrites in the church." That's like saying there are too many alcoholics in AA. Of course there are hypocrites in the church. Church is for all of us who know that there is something

better around the corner and we can't get there alone! Thank you for helping me! I hope I can help you a little bit, too.

Here's what I told the children: We all mess up. We all have problems. Sometimes we break God's law. And there are consequences, big ones. But God loves us. God loves us way too much to allow us to stay in that place of exile, self-hatred and self-destruction. God is the Redeemer.

Like the Israelites, God wants to bring you home. God want to give you a new name...NOT Dopey or Screw Up or Failure. God calls you Beloved. God names you Delight. God creates a Beloved Community—that's what we are to be -- a church that surrounds and supports you and holds you accountable. Into that Beloved Community God sends prophets – visionary people can see down the road and imagine a different future – a future of justice and freedom. One of them we will celebrate tomorrow. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a prophet who received a new name. Like Isaiah he could not keep silent, and those who come after him cannot keep silent until this land receives a new name – until this land that has been named Divided, Separated, and Segregated, is finally called United, Free, Equal, and Open to All. That is the prophet's role; it is the church's role, to speak and not keep silent, to speak until the proud division ends, and we are one.

In April of 1963 King went to Birmingham, Alabama where he took part in a nonviolent protest against racial segregation. During the protest King and several others were arrested and held for four days in the Birmingham city jail. A friend smuggled in a newspaper containing a statement by eight white Alabama clergymen criticizing King and his methods. One of the eight was Dr. Edward Ramage, senior pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham.

Dr. Ramage and the other signers politely but firmly accused King of inciting hatred and violence. They implied that “outsiders” like King were unwelcome in Birmingham, and that African-Americans should work out issues of inequality in the local courts.

King wrote his famous Letter from the Birmingham Jail as a response to Ramage and the other white clergy. Most people know that. What I did not know is what happened next.

King's words in the Letter had a huge impact on Ramage. After reading it, the Presbyterian pastor took the controversial step of declaring First Presbyterian Church desegregated -- open to all, regardless of race. Some of the members of the congregation opposed the idea, and Ramage was eventually asked to leave First Presbyterian because he refused to back down from his stance of inclusivity and welcome. Eventually his vision was affirmed by the Session, and today openness and diversity are among the hallmarks of the church's ministry.

Ramage could not keep silent. Like King, and the prophet Isaiah, he had to speak the truth that God put on his heart; the truth that someday we will be united and all people will be free.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

ⁱ Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years*, Simon & Schuster, 1989, 39

ⁱⁱ Isaiah 2:3, 5:24; 8:16; 8:20; 24:5