

Play: T Graham Brown - Wine into water

Can you feel the pain and the lostness of the singer of this song? The irony of this song is, of course, that he is asking for the opposite of the miracle we read about in John. But the significance of the song is that the singer is experiencing the same desperation that both Isaiah was feeling for Israel and the wedding host of Cana was feeling for himself. He is in over his head. There is nothing he can do to change his situation by himself and he is crying out to God for a miracle.

This same desperate call for God to intervene are heard here in the words of the prophet Isaiah as he laments to God on behalf of the Israelites. God had chosen this little tribe of Israel and had called them his own. He had delivered them from the bondage of slavery to Egypt and had led them to the promised land where this ever expanding clan of 12 families began to develop into a nation. Under David they were united and became a small nation. Then after a series of unfaithful kings they played the harlot and became unfaithful to their one true God. Finally God sent the Assyrians into Northern Israel and those tribes were dispersed among their other enemies and lost forever through intermarriage. Soon after the southern kingdom was taken into captivity by the Babylonians and remained there for quite some time. During that time God purged from their heart the desire to serve other Gods and they returned to their first love.

At the time of Isaiah's writing, they had returned to their homeland and were in the process of rebuilding their culture, their religion, their temple and their lives but they were stuck. They had become discouraged, more than that, they were disheartened. They felt that they could not go on. Work had come to a halt and in this maze of despair, Isaiah, like the man in our song, in desperation cries out to God.

Flash forward 1,000 years. We are at a wedding in Cana and the wine has just about run out. The wedding host is frantic. How could this have happened? He goes to the wine stewards and tells them there must be more wine, search everywhere to see if they can find some more wine. Then he goes to the wedding planner. How could this be? How could she have not had enough wine to last the duration of the wedding? So the wedding planner starts going from one person to another asking if they know where there is a late night store where she can get more wine. No one had any information and in desperation she cries out, "Holy Mother Of God" and right on time Mary says to Jesus, "They have no wine." And to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

Whether it is a national crisis, or a personal one, when we are in that place where we can not do any more, where we are in over our heads, when we have no power to change our situations and we are in despair, we have a couple of choices.

One, to give up, Two to worry ourselves to death, or Three to cry out to God for his deliverance from our situations.

We can learn a lot from Isaiah this morning. Isaiah has always been a prophet of promise. He had promised for God that the Babylonians would be defeated and Israel released from captivity and these promises had come to pass. But now the once hope filled Israel was battling with deteriorating morale caused by broken dreams and crumbling faith. The people wonder if God is powerless to fulfill the promises made during their exile or if God is indifferent to the plight of God's people.

In this context the prophet does not announce another promise or declare another good news headline. The prophet's first audience is not Israel; it is God. And he addresses God directly and truthfully describes the situation.

This is the first step of being heard by God. We have to get honest with God. In our pain and our fear, just hearing another promise of God may not be what we need. We must be able to name the reality that we are facing. This is the power of verse 1. For the discouraged returnees or for anyone who is dealing with the feeling that God has turned away in indifference, we are encouraged to follow Isaiah's example. We need to acknowledge the reality of what we are feeling – the defeat and broken dreams – before we can move on to words of hope.

Isaiah gives us a model for honest prayer when life seems difficult and God seems distant. We can dare to emulate Isaiah's lament and bold protest, "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..." or the song writer's, "God turn this wine into water," or the wine steward, "we are out of wine".

The lament is as much a part of the vocabulary of prayer as thanksgiving and praise. Isaiah's protest to God reminds us that in our prayers "there is nothing out of bounds, nothing precluded or inappropriate." We must be able to get real with God and cry out to God.

But the lament is only the beginning. After the lament comes the rescue. God is always there. The Psalmist says his steadfast love endures forever. It isn't long after Isaiah laments that words of hope begin to reappear. God will change the name of Israel from Forsaken and Desolate to "My Delight Is In You" and "Married". God is going to change Israel's circumstances so that all will see that God has turned towards her. She will no longer be called Forsaken or Desolate by God instead she will be known as My Delight Is In You and Married. God's steadfast love will be made manifest in her. Her strength will be coupled with God's strength and she will be known as Married.

*Adapted and quoted from Feasting on the Word, Year C Vol1 pp 242-261

We too, when we are in that place of utter despair or fear for our future, must be reminded that God has not forsaken us. God will never leave or forsake us. God is with us and understands our fears and our frustrations and hears them and is in them with us. And we can take heart in Isaiah's promise that we will not be named desolate or forsaken but we also will bear the names "my delight is in you" and "married."

Our faith is in a God of steadfast love and faithfulness. The Psalmist reminds us: Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains,
your judgements are like the great deep; you save humans and animals alike, O LORD.

How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house,
and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.

We are reminded by the Psalmist that the nature of God's love and faithfulness is woven into the very fabric of the universe; the whole world is dependent upon it. Each of us have a place in this love and that place is described as underneath the shadow of his wings.

We find in these verses a radical, joyous, inclusive vision of God's great love. The psalmist exalts – how wonderful it is, O God, that you draw us in, all your creatures, folded under your wing and seated at your table. This the core of a longer psalm, the rest of which describes the persistence of the wicked in trying to undo God's work and God's people. The psalmist responds by looking to God and reminding the people of God's steadfastness. God's faithfulness.

In the midst of threatening opposition, mischief makers, and evil doers, God persists in love, calling us always home to the joy that comes when we are gathered together, drinking from the river of delight. In the face of persistent arrogance, deceit and ways that are not God's ways, the psalmist praises God, rejoicing in the fact that all people may take refuge in the shadow of God's wings. This prayer includes not only the people who have it all figured out, but all people seeking sanctuary from the things that threaten to undo us.

God's steadfast love is a love so great that it stretches to the depths of the earth and yet so gentle that it folds us under its wings. God's love is always present, holding together the depths of creation and the core of our being. We are dependent on God. We rely on God for the water of life, and for the food at the table. We depend on the light of God to keep seeing the way.

*Adapted and quoted from Feasting on the Word, Year C Vol1 pp 242-261

2nd Sunday after Epiphany Year C Isaiah 62:1-5; Psalms 36:5-10; John 2:1-11
January 20 2012 God's Steadfast Love and Faithfulness

Whether we are a nation in crises as Israel was, or an individual at the end of their own strength needing the miracle of wine turning back into water, or an embarrassed wedding host needing to be rescued from a major social guffaw, God is faithful to be there, to hear us, and to answer us. God's steadfast love will change our name from Forsaken to My Delight Is in You. And from Desolate to Married. And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

So we pray with the Psalmist

O continue your steadfast love to those who know you, and your salvation to the upright of heart! Amen.

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