

First Sunday after Christmas Day
Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Psalm 148; Luke 2:22-40; Galatians 4:4-7

Isaiah 61:10-62:3 is the end of one chapter of the book of Isaiah and the beginning of the next. But these two chapters are not meant to stand alone, but to be of one cloth, the second reinforcing and further developing the argument of the first.

The prophet begins by referring to himself, comparing himself to a bride who is being given in marriage to Israel's bridegroom, Yahweh. "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garment of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations" (61:10-11).

The prophet sees himself (at least in this context) as the Suffering Servant about whom he wrote in Isaiah 42:1-4, 49:1-6; 50:4-9 and 52:13-53:12. He begins today's chapter with a description of what he is the first of several of God's anointed ones are called to do: "to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoner; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (61:1-2). This passage, of course, was used by Jesus 700 years later in his declaration of his mission in Luke 4:18-19. The anointed one's task is threefold: he is to declare to Israel the arrival of God's promised salvation, to minister to the poor and the oppressed, and to proclaim that Jubilee has come upon the land.

In today's Old Testament lesson, the prophet describes himself as a bride about to be given in marriage to Yahweh, who is to be his bridegroom. As a bride is decked in the finest clothes her family can afford, so the prophet is to be decked in "the garments of salvation" and "the robe of righteousness", thus bringing by the prophet's very presence wholeness (the Hebrew meaning of the word "salvation") and the ethics of justice (the Hebrew meaning of the word "righteousness") upon the people. This is how the bride, by her very presence, becomes the servant who heals her nation and enables them to act both internally just toward all its citizens and externally just toward all the other nations of the world. Thus, by assuming this role of "bride" or "Suffering Servant", the prophet becomes the planter and caretaker of a garden of Yahweh's "righteousness and praise" that will "spring up before all the nations".

Then, at the beginning of chapter 62, the author of this prophecy suddenly changes his identification of the Suffering Servant. "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" (62:1-3).

Suddenly, it is Israel who is the bride! The prophet passes on his role of Suffering Servant to Israel. It is Zion who is now recognized as the beloved of God. The marital imagery is a symbol frequently used by Isaiah for Israel (cf. 49:18; 52:1; 54:11-12; 62:4-5). And here he resorts to it

once again. It is Israel who is declared God's beloved, God's chosen – and the prophet recedes into the background.

In Isaiah 62, the prophet tells us three things about Israel as it accepts becoming the bride. First, she is vindicated by God. The nation and holy city destroyed by Babylon in 587 BCE (and therefore, seeming to be rejected by God) is restored by God to her former place among the pivotal cities of the world, for she will take upon herself God's clothing of "salvation" and "righteousness" – of "wholeness" and "justice", becoming as a nation that which God calls all nations to be.

Second, "You, Israel, shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give you." Just as a bride, when she is wed, changes her name to that of her husband, so Israel will change its name to that of bride of Yahweh. She will take on the name – and consequently the very essence of her Lord and Master. In accepting God's design for her national life – politically, economically, socially, spiritually – she will become "a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of her God". In becoming God's "Servant", she becomes God's liberated and just one!

Third, "the nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory". Just as the prophet as Suffering Servant was witness to Israel, so Israel, in accepting the role of becoming the bride of Yahweh will become witness to all the nations of the world. They will see in her, and in the way she chooses to live her political, economic and religious life, a model of what it means to be a nation and a people under God!

But why would this passage be chosen to be the Old Testament lesson for the First Sunday in Christmastide? Perhaps it is because that as the prophet proved an inadequate Suffering Servant and passed on that calling to Israel, the political, economic and religious powers of Israel had not kept their marriage vows to God and thus the privilege and obligation of being the Suffering Servant was now about to pass on to a newborn baby lying in a manger!

Psalm 148. This psalm is, in my opinion, one of the finest of the psalms of praise – and is most fittingly selected for this festival time of the year, the first Sunday after Christmas. It begins:

"Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights! Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his hosts" (148:1-2)!

The Psalmist, following the same identical pattern set in verse two, then goes through a list of all that should praise God – sun, moon, stars, highest heavens, waters above the heavens, the earth, sea monsters, the deeps of the ocean, fire, hail, snow, frost, stormy wind (i.e., the elements), mountains, hills, fruit trees, cedars, wild animals, cattle, creeping things (that is, insects and reptiles), birds, kings, the people, princes, rulers, young men and women, old people.

In this naming of all the elements one can imagine, the Psalmist has followed an intriguing order. First, heavenly beings praise the Lord (vs. 2), reminding us of the angel chorus (the highest of the high) appearing to the shepherds (the lowest of the low) and giving glory to God for the birth

of Jesus. Second, the universe praises the Lord, in that, in its sheer scale, grandeur, expanse of time and mystery, it testifies to the mind-boggling creative energy of God (vss. 3-6). Third, the earth, with its magnificent geology, its seasons, its elements and its fecundity praises God by its very act of simply being (vss. 7-9).

Fourth, the living creatures – wild animals, domesticated animals, reptiles, insects, birds – all praise the Lord by simply being what they were created to be (vs. 10). And, finally, all humanity both unintentionally and intentionally praises the Lord (vss. 11-14). The kings “and all rulers of the earth”, along with their people unintentionally praise the Lord in that they are subject to the will of the Lord even though they do not acknowledge his authority (cf. Pss. 2, 82; Isa. 10:5-19; 31:1-3). But also God’s chosen people, Israel, intentionally and proactively praise the Lord – both male and female, young and old, those who can reproduce (the Hebrew translated “male and female” [*bakhurim* and *betulot*] means men and women capable of reproduction) and all who cannot reproduce (“young” and “old”) – whoever you are and whatever your age – praise the Lord!

In other words, what the Psalmist is declaring is that everything in the universe, whether intelligent or not, animate or inanimate, cognizant of God’s work or oblivious to God’s creative power – everything, by its very existence, gives praise to its creator! And they ultimately give praise to the Lord because “(God) has raised up a horn for his people”. For God has moved beyond the creation of the cosmos to the historical redemption of humanity, and has done so through “his people” and the “horn” from among them that “he has raised up”.

God has chosen one people to be his people, not in order to be exclusive but to be a means of redemption and liberation to the world. And the vehicle by which Israel acts for the redemption and liberation of the world is through its “horn” (cf. Ps. 89:17, 24, 38) – a ruler called forth by God who will be Israel’s strength and transformation which he will pass to the people! This work of redemption and liberation, therefore, is the final reason that God is to be praised. The creation itself, in all of its complexity, captures our awe for God’s capacity. But God’s work of liberation is what captures our loyalty, love and respect, for it provides for us a “horn” that both sets us free and enables us to become freedom to the rest of the world.

“Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven. He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the Lord” (148:13-14)!

Luke 2:22-40 continues a theme introduced in the earlier accounts of Luke dealing with the miraculous conception of John the Baptist and of Jesus and of Jesus’ birth. That theme is the intriguing interplay of the actions of the “Powers that Be”, the everyday and common actions of the peasants, and the miraculous work of God impacting both.

The actions of the “Powers That Be” are captured, in the first chapter of Luke, in the doubting but obedient response of the priest, Zechariah in regards to God’s promise of the birth of John. It is important to keep in mind that Zechariah is a part of the religious “system” of Israel, yet he is faithful to God’s call to him rather than seeking his own power. The common actions are the

pregnancy of both Anna (Zechariah's wife) and Mary (Joseph's betrothed), and Mary's visit to Anna. The miraculous was the conception of both babies by the intervention of God as integral steps of God's action for the transformation of the world, as well as Elizabeth's insight regarding the conception of Jesus, Mary's song of praise and Zechariah's prophecy.

In the second chapter, the three themes continue. The political system (in this case, Rome, demonstrates its use of unilateral power by placing an impossible demand upon the people by requiring a census and in doing so, unwittingly prepares the stage for the birth of Jesus in conformity to Hebrew prophecy. The common people, Mary and Joseph, do as they are commanded, travel to Bethlehem, are helped by a midwife, and Mary births her first child (babies are born every day!). But the entire story is overshadowed by the miraculous with angels appearing to shepherds and announcing the birth of their Messiah.

Now, in today's scripture lesson, the same pattern occurs. The Hebrew religious system requires circumcision and naming of babies at the Temple, and the attending priests simply do their job, but God also touches the hearts of two highly respected Jewish leaders, Simeon and Anna the prophet. The common was that of circumcision, naming and presentation – a ritual that every male baby (cf. circumcision, naming and presentation) and female baby (cf. naming and presentation) went through, with the ritual happening to other babies every day of the year. The miraculous was the prophecies of both Simeon and Anna, which indicated that this was not just another birth ritual, but was the coming of “the Lord's Messiah” (2:26).

Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the Temple to be both named and circumcised, and for Mary to be purified from her childbirth. Coming to the Temple for this ceremony was required by Jewish Law (Lev. 12, Gen. 17:9-14), and Mary and Joseph are being faithful in keeping every measure of that Law. It is particularly intriguing that Luke reminds the reader that Mary and Joseph are only poor peasants; this we know because the price they pay for Mary's purification (“a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons” vs. 24) is what Leviticus 12:8 stipulates is the “bargain” price that only demonstrably poor people are required to pay! The price for circumcision is a small gift of money, but that is not recorded in the text.

The naming of Jesus was significant, as was the naming of any Jew. A person's name symbolized either who he was or what he would contribute to life. Thus, “Moses” meant “the one drawn out”, and the baby Moses was drawn out of the Nile and later drew the people of Israel out of bondage to Pharaoh. The name “David” meant “beloved of God”, and David was “a man after God's own heart” (I Sam. 13:14). The Hebrew version of “John” (a Greek name) meant “God is gracious” – and God had indeed been gracious to the childless Anna and Zechariah, as he had been to Abraham and Sarah!

At his circumcision, Joseph and Mary named their baby, “Jesus” (2:21), the very name the angel told them to give him when the child was conceived in Mary's womb (1:31). Thus, just as a baby is publicly named in a Christian baptism or dedication (the officiant asks, “What is the name of your child?”), so the Jews named their children at the Jewish ritual comparable to baptism – circumcision! It was an ordinary event. But it was no ordinary name, for the name “Jesus” meant “God saves” – and that, Luke wants the reader to understand, is what Jesus' life,

ministry, death and resurrection was all about – bringing personal liberation and corporate transformation to both the Jewish and Gentile worlds!

So these were all ordinary events in Judaism – the naming of the child, his circumcision and the mother’s purification. It happened many times each day to many Jewish families. It was a part of the daily ritual within the Temple. There was nothing to mark this performance of these rituals for this baby from any other performance of the identical rituals for other families. Or was it?

“Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah” (2:25-26)!

It is very intriguing that Luke makes a sharp divide between the circumcision of Jesus and the stories of Simeon and Anna. Jesus’ naming, circumcision and Mary’s purification were all done as ceremonial acts, the priests likely moving with alacrity through the rituals they had performed countless times over. There was, Luke wants us to understand, nothing extraordinary about those rituals done over Jesus, for it did not draw the attention of the attending priests. They simply did their expected job and received their expected payment. Nothing extraordinary happened because these “leaders of Israel” were looking for nothing extraordinary to happen!

The extraordinary began when Mary and Joseph collected their child, turned and walked away from the circumcision table. It was then that they met Simeon! And Simeon was expectant! Simeon was looking for “the consolation of Israel”¹ (vs. 25). Simeon was looking for the coming of “the Lord’s Messiah” (vs. 26). And as soon as he saw the infant Jesus, he knew he had found him!

Simeon requests to hold the baby from a startled Mary who entrusts Jesus to this prophetic stranger. The scene is a tender one. “Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God, saying, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (2:28-32).

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word”. This prayer has come down into Christian liturgy as the *Nunc Dimittis*, so named because it “dismisses” God’s servant from worship. The *Nunc Dimittis* is the most beautiful of concluding prayers, used in the Daily Office of many traditions (Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Methodist and Lutheran churches). It is the last of the four magnificent songs in the preamble to the Gospel of Luke (the others being 1:47-55; 1:68-59 and 2:14), and it is both the most beautiful and the most poignant of those songs.

¹ The term, “consolation of Israel” was Luke’s shorthand way to refer to the Jewish tradition that God would personally intervene in world affairs to restore Israel to being the world’s archetypal “shalom community”, and that God would do this through “God’s Messiah”. Believing that this would most certainly happen “consoled” most Israelites.

The opening sentence of the prayer is its most powerful. First, it addresses God as “Master.” The term, “master”, is a most unusual address for God, only used here and in Acts 4:24, and nowhere in the Old Testament. It is a word of total submission, for it is the title used by slaves and servants toward their overlord. Given the underlying themes of the three stories related thus far by Luke -- that each story describes the autocratic and God-ignoring political, economic and religious systems and yet have people in them sensitive to God’s action, the everyday and common actions of the peasants disconnected to the “Powers”, and the miraculous work of God impacting both – Luke’s use of the unusual word “Master” to describe God and the entire thrust of the *Nunc Dimittis* is intriguing.

Could it be that what Luke is wishing to communicate to his readers is that it’s not about the systems, it’s not even about the peasants, but rather it’s all about God and God’s action in the world. As the saying goes, “Wake up and smell the coffee!” Wake up, Powers. Wake up, people. Wake up, Israel. Wake up, world. God is acting! God is on the move! God is on the move through this baby who has been brought to his predicted birth place by Powers oblivious to him, who has been so commonly born and so miraculously celebrated. And God will now use this baby, grown into an adult, to challenge the Powers, to transform the people and to bring God’s liberating salvation to all the world. Thus, it is God who is in charge around here, who will bring to pass what God intends for humanity, that God will overcome the Power’s efforts to control or to dominate, that God’s purposes will be realized – and your appropriate response, whether you are reader, peasant or Power is to submit to those intentions and become servant to the God named “Master”.

Second, the opening sentence of this prayer begins (after recognizing God’s authority), “now”. It is a startling word, even in English. But in Greek, it is far more powerful. It has been placed in the emphatic position of the sentence (“Now you are dismissing your servant in peace”), and that emphasis stresses that an action has now just occurred that will keep on moving through the world like a wave moves toward the shore. God has acted to liberate and redeem humanity, and that action now continues unstopably into the future. With God’s act, salvation has already dawned on humanity for Jesus has come and nothing will ever be the same again – no matter what the Powers might do!

The third key word in the opening sentence is “dismiss” (it can also be translated “release”). “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace”. The word “dismiss” can be interpreted in two ways. First, it can be used as an euphemism for “to let die”. That is clearly one of Luke’s intentions in this passage because he has earlier told us that Simeon “would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah” (vs. 26). Well, now he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. So his death was imminent.

But the word also means “to discharge”. It is the word that a master uses to his servant, and it can also be intended as the same by Luke, given his heavy emphasis on master and servant previously in this sentence. Simeon can now be discharged by God from his weighty responsibility, which was to keep on proclaiming the coming of the Messiah for whom he was to wait (his very waiting implying that the Messiah would come during Simeon’s lifetime). Now Simeon can put down this heavy burden, for his wait is now over, the Messiah has been born, and his work is now completed. Only death is now ahead of him.

The prayer itself actually consists of three couplets. All are intentionally rooted in Old Testament scripture, primarily Isaiah 40:5, 42:6; 46:13; 49:6; 52:1 and 60:1. And the three couplets tell us three things. First, God is now acting, and is doing so through the birth of God's Messiah (vs. 29-30). Second, Simeon introduces the image of the Isaiac Servant of Yahweh as the primary metaphor for interpreting the work and mission that this baby will undertake as a man – a mission that will seek to restore God's people to the Jubilee world that God intends (vs. 31). Third, this redemptive work of the man Jesus will not be for Israel alone but for the entire world, as his mission results in the transformation of the world's Powers, the world's people, and even of the miraculous and holy of life (vs. 32).

Thus, Simeon ends his psalm of praise. But he is not finished yet. He turns to Mary and speaks to her words that had to be extremely disconcerting. "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed, so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too" (vss. 34-35). Evil, Simeon is saying, will not surrender quietly. In one sense, the battle is over because God is on the move and has acted through the birth of this baby. But in another sense, the battle has not yet begun. The lust for power, the seduction of wealth, the yearning for prestige, the need to thrust away all people not like yourself – whether incorporated in the way the Roman Empire or the Hebrew priesthood choose to rule their worlds, or in the lusts, meanness and greed of the people, or in the use of manipulation by those setting the world's values – will not accept this baby willingly. All that he stands for, and all that he seeks to do in ministry that will empower and liberate people will be opposed. He will be criticized, negated, betrayed, hunted down, even crucified. The world has only now begun a massive battle that will go on for thousands of years. And worst of all – "a sword will pierce your own soul too!"

There is nothing further told of Simeon; he simply disappears from the pages of scripture. But Luke then tells the story of Anna the prophet, who "never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day". She, too, sees the infant Jesus. And she adds her voice to Simeon's, praising God for bring about "the redemption of Jerusalem" through Jesus.

Luke's birth story then ends with the gentle words, "When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him" (vss. 39-40). This, of course, is meant as a transitional statement by Luke, in order to move the reader from the incidents surrounding the birth of Jesus to a story about Jesus as a youth. Luke will, in turn, end the story of the lad Jesus at the Jerusalem temple with the words, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor" (2:52) in order to transition the reader to an adult Jesus, ready to commence his ministry.

But the passage is more than solely transitional. It also tells us of Jesus' maturation, first from a baby and child into a youth (vs. 40) and then into an adult (vs. 52). It tells us that he physically "grew and became strong", that he was more than a typical Jewish student learning "Torah" but also one who was growing increasingly wise, reflective and deliberative. And finally, it tells us that "the favor of God was upon him" – that is, as he grew physically and intellectually, he was also growing spiritually, becoming increasingly in tune with God's call upon his life and eager to

follow that call. Thus, Luke has now prepared us for the adult stories of Jesus, as we see him at work throughout Israel in order to bring to life once again the kingdom of God – God’s “shalom community” of justice, equity and oneness with God and all humanity – a kingdom for which Jesus was going to have to die!

Galatians 4:4-7 is one of the finest theological statements written by Paul that states the particular importance of the birth of Jesus.

“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God”.

Were Gentiles, like the Galatians, Christians? There were those Jewish Christians who had come to the churches in Gentile Galatia, telling the early Christians there that they could not become Christians unless they became Jews first. And the only way that male Gentiles could become Jews was to submit to the rite of circumcision (both male and female Gentile Jews were expected to observe the Law of Moses, as well). It is Paul’s concern to correct this misinterpretation of God’s saving work among Gentiles that prompted his writing of his Letter to the Galatians. And it is that concern that dominates today’s Epistle Lesson.

Paul uses an intriguing argument, steeped in the culture of his day, to state his case that submission to the Law (including circumcision) was unnecessary for salvation. He does this by arguing the difference between being a slave and a child. In the ancient world, a male child went through a strategic ceremony at a given point in his life in which he moved from childhood into adulthood.

In the Jewish world, on the first Sunday after a boy had passed his twelfth birthday, his father would take him to the synagogue where the father would publicly pray to God a thanksgiving for having been given the privilege of raising the child and, in essence, turning him over to God. The boy then prayed a prayer in which he acknowledged “my passage from boyhood to manhood”, so that henceforth he would assume responsibility for himself to “keep the commandments and bear the responsibility of mine actions”. This was the boy’s “*Bar Mitzvah*” (which means “Son of the Divine Law”)!

Likewise, in the Greek world, a boy at eighteen would participate in a festival called the “*Apatouria*” in which his head would be shaved and he would be declared an *ephebos* or member of one of the ten male “clans” of Greece. In Rome, a boy between the ages of fourteen and seventeen would participate in a public ceremony called the *Liberalia* where he would be stripped of his boyhood toga (the *toga praetexta*) and be clothed in an adult toga (the *virilis*), as he attained manhood.

The point of all these ceremonies was that, at a designated time, a boy became a man. Until then, he was a child with no capacity to participate in public life. Consequently, he had no more

rights than a slave, even if he were the son of a king. But once he went through the appropriate public ceremony (whether he was Jewish, Greek or Roman), he became a man, had “put away childish things” (in fact, in the Roman world, he had to divest himself of all his toys), and now began to act as a man in his engagement in public life.

This is why, at the beginning of Galatians 4, Paul speaks of human salvation with the words, “heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property” (4:1). So it is that those of us who are Gentiles were, at one time, like children. We are children of God the Father – that is our inheritance. But we are “no better than slaves” because we have not participated in the act that turns us from boys to men, girls to women.

“But when the fullness of time had come”, Paul wrote, “God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children” (vss. 4-5). In other words, Paul is saying that our “Bar Mitzvah”, our “Apatouria”, our “Liberalia” was the birth of Jesus Christ which set us free from sin and death. Thus, Paul is arguing, it is irrelevant whether the ceremony that turns a boy into a man is the *bar mitzvah* of the Jews, the *apatouria* of the Greeks or the *liberalia* of the Romans, the fact is that the boy is turned into a man! So it is that Jesus’ saving birth, though he was “born of a woman, born under the Jewish Law” (that was his context), was a birth in which “God sent his Son” to provide salvation to all (that was the reality). That is a saving act for all people! For just as it is foolish to demand that a Roman who has undergone the *Liberalia* not be considered a man until he undergoes his *Bar Mitzvah*, so it is equally foolish to demand that a Gentile Christian undergo the Jewish ritual of circumcision (and obedience to the Law) in order to be authentically considered a Christian!

The sign that it was Jesus’ birth and death that saves us, and not our acts (even an act as radical as circumcision), is that we all, Gentile and Jewish Christian alike, call God “Abba (daddy), Father”! Thus, he who remains enslaved by fixation on the Law, remains a child for he is as enslaved by his commitment to the law as a child is enslaved to obedience of his parents. “But he who becomes a man has put away childish things” (I Cor. 13:12), and now embraces God as Father because he has trusted in that father as symbolized in his participation in the sacrament of baptism. “So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God” (vs. 7).

(Cycle B Christmas 1.doc)