

## Reflections on the Journey of Sermon Preparation

When I finally sat down for some serious study of the January 17 texts, I expected that the journey towards a sermon intended to challenge exceptionalism would follow my usual pattern of Sunday sermon crafting. I intended to study the texts, choose an angle that would help reveal God's inclusive love for all nations, and then draft a manuscript that would help present the concept in a compelling way. I selected Isaiah 62:1-5 and John 2:1-16. What I didn't expect was to experience a series of "crisis moments" which greatly influenced both the content of the sermon and the manner in which it was presented.

**Crisis moment #1:** *"What do I really believe about the status of Israel as the chosen people?"* Since the idea of Israel as God's chosen people has led many to believe that Jews have a privileged relationship with God whose interests surpass the interests of other nations in importance, from the beginning I knew the sermon would need to address the status of Israel as God's chosen people. Nevertheless, I found myself wrestling with my own resistance to challenge the notion of Israel as God's chosen people. I simply did not have any Scriptural basis to challenge this election. In fact, as I studied the texts in context I realized I could not preach with integrity against understanding Israel as God's chosen people. I could only preach in favor of an understanding of that election that honored God's intention for Israel to be a *just* people instead of a people who would use their status as a chosen people in a selfish and oppressive way. The sermon title "Chosen for Righteousness" was born out of this conviction.

**Crisis moment #2:** *"Why should my people care?"* Even though I have seen with my own eyes the terrible suffering brought upon Palestinians through lived Jewish exceptionalism, and I know we all have a part to play in ending exceptionalism, in the course of preparing for the sermon I realized neither of these reasons would be particularly compelling to 90% of the people who would attend church that morning. Most come to church to hear about their own relationship and identity to their God, not the identity of another people or their own role in social change. I knew then that if I was aiming for an effective and memorable sermon, the sermon would have to be first and foremost rooted in the question of understanding their own identity as a chosen people, and only address the issue of Israel-Palestine as part of the path to learning about our identity in relationship to God. It would be indirect learning.

**Crisis moment #3:** *"How do I capture attention through such a complex path?"* Needless to say, drafting the sermon I believed needed to be preached became a more complicated process than initially anticipated. As I struggled to make the presentation accessible instead of burdensome, I became convinced this was a time to incorporate testimony into the sermon, make congregation members participants in discovery, and leave my notes behind entirely for maximum potential of emotional interaction.

In the end, the response for the sermon was immediate, mixed, and plentiful. Many long-time members in attendance expressed their excitement that "Chosen for Righteousness" had presented a perspective they had never considered before about the responsibilities of those chosen by God. Others asked so many questions during the subsequent fellowship time that the after-worship Adult Christian Education class turned into a discussion of the sermon theme. And while some members expressed their resistance to the "new" idea that God's election of Israel did not give them a privileged status, a couple of others were grateful that they had fresh theological grounding to discuss with evangelical acquaintances who regularly promote Jewish exceptionalism in their discourse. I was satisfied that the message seemed to be heard, in spite of its messiness.

**Sermon: “Chosen for Righteousness”**

**Scriptures: Isaiah 62:1-5; John 2:1-17 (New International Version)**

**Date Delivered: Sunday, January 17, 2016**

**Congregation: Christ Presbyterian Church, Hanover Park, IL  
(Under 100, Multicultural)**

When I returned from my trip to Israel and Palestine last summer, I shared with you how I was convinced that the experience would provide us with food for thought for many times beyond the first few days. Today is one of those times. We are in the midst of a sermon series that explores what it means to be a people who belong to God, and to lead us in our reflections about this topic I'd like to go back to some of the lessons learned in that holy place.

One of the deepest impressions I still carry about life in Israel and Palestine is a grave sense of injustice. When my group and I were driving from Tel Aviv on the way to Jerusalem I was struck by how beautiful the area seemed to be. I loved the brightness of the sun, the colors of the desert... When we explored Jerusalem, particularly the part of Jerusalem that is within the bounds of the State of Israel, I felt like it was a place where I could surely live, because aside from seeing soldiers almost everywhere the city felt both vibrant and safe. But when we began to explore East Jerusalem--the portion of the city that is Palestinian land under Israeli occupation--a contrast began to emerge. The Palestinian homes in East Jerusalem had big black tanks on top of them! Soon enough we learned that the tanks were used to store water because the State of Israel did not distribute water equally to East Jerusalem. The people often went without or had to pay a lot more than Israelis on the other side! Then we traveled farther into the West Bank and saw the settlements. Think of them like gated communities of Jewish-only residents, but built on land that was *not* part of Israel proper. Many of the settlements could be easily identified because they waved the Israeli flag proudly, as if claiming for Israel each one of the hill tops where they stood.

The sense of injustice only grew when we saw the massive separation wall, nearly 30 feet high in some places, because this alleged security measure had portions built inside the West Bank instead of properly along the borders of the State of Israel. As we saw the Wall cutting inside Palestinian areas we could scarcely doubt the stories we heard from people in the West Bank: stories about Israeli orders to vacate their own land, the place where their families had lived for generations, because it had been declared “state-land”; stories of bulldozers coming in the middle of the night to raze villages to the ground...

To me Israel seemed to be slowly invading all the land it did not yet have without a second thought about the fate of the thousands being hurt and displaced, and I wondered how it could be that any Jewish people allow it to happen, let alone support any of it. How could a people with their own history as ones displaced from their homes and treated as second-class citizens justify a similar fate for their own neighbors? The answer to that question is obviously complex and multilayered. We could talk for hours about entrenched national aspirations, about the power of institutionalized fear, about how blind any human beings can be when they are basking in comfort and abundance. But there is a component that we need to talk about because it has to do with *faith* and the stories we tell within communities of faith. It comes in with the understanding of Israel as the chosen people of God.

There are those—and perhaps you have heard some of them—who say that because the ancient Israelites were named as God’s chosen people and given the promise of the land, then the current State of Israel and its citizens have a divine right to claim all the land for themselves. If other nations have to suffer because of this divine right, then so be it, because Israel has a privileged relationship with God that privileges their interests.

When it comes to justifying their position, these folk point to the Bible. They may bring out Genesis 12 and the pact that God made with Abraham to give the geographical area to him and his descendants forever. They may point to passages in the prophets like Isaiah 43, where we hear the prophet proclaiming to the Israelites that God calls them God’s own, that they are redeemed, and God seems willing to trade other nations for them. Indeed, there are many passages that can be read as heralding the special relationship of God with the people of Israel, and the Old Testament Scripture we read this morning is one of them.

So let us turn to that passage for a moment. Isaiah 62:1-5. (Give time for people to look in their Bibles). The first thing we hear is the prophet insisting that he will not keep silent until vindication and salvation arrives for the city of Jerusalem (v.1). So right from the beginning the language makes us think that this is a promise of God for the people of Israel, that the day will come when the people of this nation will be lifted up to a more glorious state of affairs which we usually assume as corresponding with great safety and prosperity. This idea can be reinforced when we hear next that the nations will be witnesses to this new glorious state of affairs and that part of the package is a new name given by God (v.2). The signs of the value of the people and the city keep coming as the prophet declares that the people will be a “crown of splendor in God’s hand” and “a royal diadem” (v.3), culminating with a powerful metaphor for God’s special relationship with Israel: marriage (v.4,5). The city of Jerusalem and its inhabitants are imagined as the bride when God is the groom; the land is called married; God is said to rejoice in the nation just as the groom would rejoice over a young woman.

At first glance it seems that everything about this portion of Scripture reinforces the idea that there is a precious relationship between the people of Israel and God, a relationship which includes great promises of future and unavoidable prosperity.

But we have to ask ourselves this question: *Is that all the passage says?*

I have spoken to you before about the great need to read Scripture in context and it is especially important here. It just so happens that this very passage of Scripture comes at the relative end of a series of prophetic words intended for the ancient Israelites when they had returned from the Babylonian exile, a time when they were trying to deal with the disappointment of the conditions once they came back home.

And if you turn back to look at some of the previous words of God for the people you will find that God’s message for them has not been a consistent message of blessing and promise. God has also called the people to repentance, reminded them of the importance of following the law, and urged them towards their forgotten duties to God and neighbors.

Take for example the beginning of chapter 56 in the Book of Isaiah. Many scholars believe that this chapter is the beginning of the larger section of prophetic oracles of which chapter 62 is part, and hear how it begins: *This is what the LORD says: “Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed.” (Isa 56:1)* It leaves no doubt that God cares deeply about how the people behave.

Then, after some chapters of praise and promise for those who follow the law, and some firm rebuke to those who believe they can do whatever they please without concern to God or others, God sends the prophet to clear up some misunderstandings with the people. That portion of the story starts in Isaiah 58. The Israelites are upset because they had been carrying on with their religious obligations-- fasting, praying, gathering for religious assemblies-- but God was not making them great after their exile, or restoring them to former glory. And Isaiah comes in to explain to them that for all their religious rituals they have still failed to do what God requires of them. Take a look at chapter 58, v. 6-8. Speaking on behalf of God the prophet says: *“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.”*

Notice that this pattern of living in justice to receive the reward of glory continues all through the end of the chapter. Receiving the promise of visible magnificence from God is inextricably linked with a life that tends to the downtrodden, occupies itself with righting social wrongs, and keeps hands clean from immoral deeds.

You read all of this and suddenly Isaiah 62:1-5 begins to sound very different. It’s hard not to hear the voice of the prophet crying out as one who continues to insist that justice must rise from its own people; as one who keeps calling the crowds to recognize that when they have become the righteous people whom God has been calling them to be, *then* the nations shall see Israel’s glory, Israel will get a new name, they will all cease to be as one abandoned, and will embody the full reality of what it means to be bound to God in great intimacy. It’s hard not to see that Israel’s identity as a chosen people cannot be separated from their social responsibility. They have a blessing and a purpose, and the two always go together. They are chosen for righteousness.

So in the measure that any person would claim the benefits of being a people chosen by God while ignoring the God-given responsibility to act justly, they are misunderstanding what it means to belong to God. In the measure that any Jewish citizens of the State of Israel claim the rewards of their election while being indifferent to the suffering of their literal neighbors they have misjudged their own identity as God’s chosen ones.

But this is not a sermon for Jews or Israeli citizens. It is a sermon for you, sisters and brothers in the Christian faith. Because as we claim that we also belong to the one Holy and Righteous God through the promise of our baptism, the great temptation is to bask in all the good promises of God but forget our own calling to be righteous people. It is so easy to remember that we are

loved, forgiven and freed, and rejoice in those blessings, but forget that we are also called to be agents of justice in the world through our commitment to follow Jesus Christ.

If you have any doubts about this just pay attention to what Jesus does in the gospel reading for this morning (John 2:1-17). Two episodes, two examples of how Jesus attends to the needs around him. First we learn that Jesus and his disciples have been invited to a wedding in Cana, a very joyous occasion, but while they were there the host suffered the very embarrassing situation of having run out of wine. So Jesus' mother Mary goes to Jesus and lets him know what is going on. She nudges him to pay attention to the situation as if to say "Do something". Now Jesus immediately lets her know that this problem of the host having no more wine was none of their business. It was not his business, it was not her business...but he intervened anyway, because that's just the kind of God we have in Jesus Christ: a compassionate God. A moment later Jesus is giving instructions to the servants to get six incredibly large jars of water, which he turned to wine before anyone could realize how it came to be, and the party can continue because Jesus did what was in his power to do.

In the same way, when Jesus goes up to the temple in Jerusalem some days later Jesus was simply going for the Passover feast. But while he's there he notices that there are a lot of people making profit out of the need of worshippers to change money and buy animals for sacrifices. He notices that the Court of the Gentiles, a space designated for prayer for anyone who wants to pray, is being filled with animals and sales by those who are taking advantage of pilgrims' needs to get items before the Feast. This system was convenient for some, but not fair to the people. It was also not fair to God. So Jesus took matters into his own hands and staged the first civil protest in the gospel. He took a whip of cords and drove all the animals away. He shooed the sellers of the doves and turned the tables of those changing coins and charging for them. He could have just participated in the feast and left the system to remain how it was, but instead when he saw its injustice he decided to intervene.

It just goes to show us that we are not free to be indifferent spectators to the suffering of the world. Instead, we are called to take notice of the suffering of the world and work to restore justice where it is lacking. That is where Jesus leads us, and it has always been part and parcel of what it means to belong to the One we worship. It has always been part of the identity of people claimed and chosen by God. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.