

December 27, 2020, the First Sunday after Christmas (Year B)  
In a Foreign Land

**Isaiah 61:10-62:3**

<sup>61:10</sup> I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,  
my whole being shall exult in my God;  
for he has clothed me with the garments 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.

<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>62:1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord,  
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

They had been warned. Over and over people in a position to know told them to change their behaviors or bad things were going to happen, horrible things, unthinkable things. They didn't listen. People just don't like to listen to experts when their advice involves inconvenient changes that make people uncomfortable. So up to the very edge of disaster business went on as usual. Then one day the Babylonians stood at the gates of Jerusalem, armed to the teeth in overwhelming numbers. The survivors envied the dead as they were chained and forced to march across the deserts of the Middle East to what is now known as Iraq.

History is littered with failed cultures overwhelmed by massive armies. Most of the time, they simply disappear or become amalgamated with the captors. In ancient times invaders thought that their actions reflected what went on in heaven so if the followers of Marduk defeated those devoted to Baal then Baal became a Mardukian. The Babylonians looked around the Jewish temple for statues of the gods of Judaism to

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take back to their own temples, but no images were available. So they looted the gold and grabbed the scrolls and anything not nailed down as they burned the temple to the ground. It's one thing to add other gods to the ones you already have. That's the way things go, but for a people who believed theirs was the only God how could that God be captured by ones that don't exist? It produced a dilemma other Middle Easterners didn't confront as they fell to the Babylonian Empire. Those times produced a poem about this problem and it has amazing force for us today.

Psalm 137:1 By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion.

<sup>2</sup> On the willows there we hung up our lyres.

<sup>3</sup> For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

<sup>4</sup> How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?

Over and again in the course of my faith journey I have asked that question. It is as relevant to us now as it was in that day. We have been ravaged and taken captive so that our normal architecture is gone. What used to give us comfort and support has been taken away by cruel forces. We are in a land foreign to us where it is not even permissible to sing. How shall we sing the Lord's song in this foreign land?

Some say we must just wait it out until we get back to normal, but normal will not be the same. Shuttered storefronts and lost friends will never be returned. They have been taken from us so that what remains will cause as much pain as joy. When you visit a familiar place after many years it's startling and disconcerting. Us folks out west often joked that if you ask a Pittsburgher for directions they will start by saying, "Turn right where the Kroger used to be then take the second left, or is it the third left?" The map of our world that we carry in our heads will not match what remains out there. How shall

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we sing the Lord's song when things return to a new normal is as daunting as what we sing now.

Well, we do have the record of a people who didn't disappear or become absorbed. Stubbornly the Jewish faithful got creative in the face of disaster. They developed a portable form of their religion. Instead of a temple on a hill in Jerusalem they had written accounts of the temple that could be visited anywhere, any time. The songs were new, but the subjects were old.

Humans were not given armor or claws or sharp teeth we were given the ability to create and adapt. Our success has always been to find new ways of coping in unprecedented situations. They found a way and so much we. Faith teaches us that whatever we are going through Christ is up ahead. Whatever land we find ourselves in when this is past and new disasters loom we will find a way to take down our lyres and sing the Lord's song.

Closing prayer

Almighty God, you wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature. In your mercy, let us share the divine life of Jesus Christ who came to share our humanity, and who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.