

Returning to the Foundations of Life and Sent Out to Share Life based on Isaiah 51:1-6, David Jahnke, 8/27/17

We just heard Isaiah just call his people back to the God and the traditions that formed them as a people. Babylon had invaded, destroyed the land and the temple and exiled the privileged in Israelite society to Babylon. The privileged were concerned about losing their religion and culture while assimilating to life in Babylon. And for those left behind in Israel, their communities and way of living were in shambles.

This is the heart of the despair of poor and middle class white people in our own nation who rose up in the last election. They sense their way of life and identity slipping away. People from other nations are increasing around them. Too many have lost their economic way of life in industry and manufacturing. They sense a decline in traditional religion and morality. And they want to reclaim and recover these things. But in order for that to happen they need to understand better the rock from which they were hewn.

The prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah were bold and faithful enough to tell their people that God was in charge of their exile. The people, and leaders especially, had not understood the depths of who God was and what he was calling them to. So God would reshape their temple, their lives, even their scriptures and their faith while living in Babylon. And that happened.

And I will be blunt in saying that the same is true for white Christians in America. Instead of seeking to understand the depth of God and what he calls us and others to, we have exploited and clung to our privilege. So God is slowly eroding the false foundations from which our economic, educational and racial privilege sprung, in order to reshape us according to his eternal truths.

I watched a couple of excellent movies in the last week. The first was Hidden Figures about the African-American mathematicians who were pivotal in NASA's success in the 60s. It was very inspiring to watch these incredible women rise up in a society that did everything in its power to keep them down was very inspiring. And it also reminded me of our need to repent of a history that continues to impact the present.

Because all of this was not long ago, friends. I remember being shocked to learn that the Tennessee town I was living in in 1994 only started to let blacks go into the downtown ice cream shop 10 years earlier. Previously they could only get their ice cream from the outside window. I will also never forget the shock that came over me when I realized the meaning of the language coming from many of my fraternity brothers as they spoke of being “Jew”ed by someone or to stop being a “Jew.” When I realized what this meant, I was almost sick...

I mention this not to condemn me or you. For we all know that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. I am simply asking you to acknowledge our broken communal and national history, just as the prophets did, time and again with the Israelites. Because our faith is not just an individual faith. What we do corporately matters to God. And in understanding better our broken-ness, we will go deeper into the restoration God intends.

The other film I watched was a very powerful documentary on the 1997 Oklahoma City bombing. Timothy McVeigh was hewn from the anti-government white supremacist militia movement of his day. After the government messed up in Waco, accidentally killing 80-some Americans, McVeigh was convinced that a totalitarian government was coming after his guns, just as it came after those of the Branch Davidians. So he planned his revenge on the government and hoped to start a revolution. And we all remember the consequences for Oklahoma City.

And here are a few more really scary things: 1. McVeigh was not crazy; 2. there was a logic to the false narrative he and so many others believed. 3. 20 years later, we have more militias, more hate groups, and more economic insecurity and moral ineptitude. The authority of our religious, political, and media-based institutions has continued to erode.

And that means our leaders-- including you and me-- have to do everything in our power to rebuild trust in these authorities, rather than the opposite, as we see so many doing today. After decades of televangelists and corruption in the church, it is time to practice the love and generosity and kindness we preach. It's time to mention to unchurched friends and acquaintances the good things happening in and through our church and other churches and synagogues; time to let them know the wonderful inter-faith cooperation happening in our communities. We will have multiple opportunities for you to join that this fall.

Isaiah said this about such work: “How beautiful are those who bring good news, who proclaim peace on the mountains.” We have to become better communicators of good news and peace! We have to learn to stand up and proclaim that there is truth and love and peace and they will conquer the lies of relativism and hedonism and hatred. We denounce calling the mainstream media fake while at the same time denouncing the demonizing of politicians and institutions. All of this gradually erodes the divine foundations of truth and democracy.

When the Israelites lost the foundations of the land and temple, way of life; when religious community was in danger of being lost, many were losing hope and did not know what to believe, just like today.

But the prophet Isaiah knew God and was filled him with hope. And he called his people back to the God and the traditions of their forefathers, but here is the thing-- he recognized in those traditions a God much greater than the tribal God of Israel’s past. He reminded his people of Abraham and Sara and how many sprung from just two and how ALL the nations of the world would be blessed through the Israelites. Hear again his words:

“51:4 Listen to me, my people, and give heed to me, my nation; for a teaching will go out from me, and my justice will be a light to the peoples [of foreign nations.] 51:5 I will bring near my deliverance swiftly...” So God would deliver Israel yes but God adds...“My salvation has already gone out and my arm will rule over [those foreign peoples along the coast too.]

God was telling the Israelites that through the exile; through new relationships with foreigners and through the prosperity of many Israelites even in that foreign world that God was in Babylon too. He was the God of these easterners. And he was the God of the westerners along the coast as well.

The exile helped teach the people how deep and broad and wide God’s saving love and mercy were and who they were for! The Land and the Temple and the first covenant were not the end of God’s plan for the world but rather the beginning! Israel would be restored and that was happening... as God’s light and love for the Israelites spread also to foreigners.

I want this first and foremost to be an assurance to you. Because if God loved and would send His light to the wayward Gentiles, just imagine His love and delight in you and yours who know Jesus and the ways of His Kingdom! If God would restore Israel as its representatives reached out to the nations in love, will God not do the same for our nation as we deepen our commitment to blessing the peoples of the earth, within and beyond our borders?

God called the Israelites into newer and deeper understandings; into new worlds and relationships with foreign peoples. God is doing the same today. So what will you read or watch or do to deepen your love? Who will you reach out to with kindness, support and understanding? Is this not how we will find the restoration God desires for our souls? Isaiah and Jesus think so. Become their disciples and find the rest your soul longs for...