

Isaiah 60:1-7

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God in Christ is our identity and future.

## I. Introduction

If you visit some of the little towns in Malaysia you will find a curious thing: a heavy gray stone church that looks as if it was lifted directly from the craggy hills of the Scottish highlands and planted in the midst of the tropical setting. These were the churches built by the Scottish Presbyterian rubber planters. Their purpose was clearly to make those European worshippers at home, and at home with their God, while they lived in a foreign land. Not that it was just the Scottish Presbyterians. Many of those same towns sport an Anglican church in neo-Tudor style and a Methodist church that would have been at home in the United States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

A quick look at the letters and diaries of those Scottish, English, and American Christians reveals their anxieties. They worried that their colleagues would “go native” and lose their identity as good English or Scottish or American Christians. They worried that their children would grow “weedy” in the hot climate, and so they sent them to boarding schools in the cool hills.

The anxieties of those old colonialists are shared by some us here in Vienna. We worry about ourselves, and our children. They are not new to the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the era of globalization. When Israel was taken off into exile in Babylon it faced a national identity crisis. The center of both worship and national identity had been the temple on Mt. Zion, just as the center of national values had been the Torah, the Law of Moses. Now Israel had no temple and lived among people who didn't honor God's law, and even forbade the Israelites from following it. How, in this environment, could Israel not lose itself, and its sense of self? How could the nation and the people maintain their faith in God? How, to quote the words of Psalm 137, could they “sing the songs of the Lord in a foreign land?”

The question was answered in part by Isaiah. In his prophecies of restoration and return he keeps Israel's hope and vision focused on Mt Zion, and thus on their God, the worship of God, and God's Law. And he does something more. He places Mt. Zion at the center of the world and the history of the people's of the world. In doing so he reminds the people in exile that their God is not just a tribal or national God, but the God of all the nations. In the end it is not merely the Israelites, but all humanity, that will return from exile to God's holy mountain.

As we prepare to look more deeply at these verses, let us go to God in prayer. “Living Lord, even when we are far from home and far from ourselves, remind us that we are at home, and ourselves, with you. In Jesus name. Amen”

## II. Singing the Lord's song in a strange land.

The crisis faced by Israel in exile in Babylon can hardly be over stated. For a thousand years or more the identity of the Israel had been formed around the idea of the “promised land” where they would dwell in peace with their God, Yahweh. From the time of Solomon onward the promise of the land had been focused on one place, Mt. Zion, and the temple of Yahweh built there. Wars had been fought both with their non-Israelite neighbors and among themselves to keep Mt. Zion at the center of national identity and worship. And now they were wrenched away to Babylon, and Mt. Zion was a distant memory. Despair, anger, and hatred were all part of the Israelite response to this situation. Psalm 137 expresses this vividly. Israel weeps for Zion, the

people pray for revenge on the Babylonians, they even wish the children of their captors smashed and killed. It isn't a pretty picture, but it is true to our human nature. And it is possible that if Israel had continued to live in this state of psychological distortion and hatred that it would have wrecked the nation – even as today nations are rotted from within when they give themselves over to hatred of their neighbors.

But there was another danger as well. Israel's culture, both materially and intellectually, was not nearly as sophisticated as that of the Babylonians. Babylonian technology, agriculture, urban planning, building techniques, astronomy, mathematics, philosophy, and even literature eclipsed anything Israel had to offer. And in the end Israel would learn much from the Babylonians. One of their prophets, Jeremiah, would even encourage them to make their homes in Babylon for a time.

Yet this sophisticated culture was also dangerous. It had a seductive power common to all rich, sophisticated, and powerful cultures. And that was the temptation to abandon the one God, Yahweh, for all the little gods of Babylon.

You see in its internal struggles and its conflicts with the nations around it Israel had learned a great fact: that there was only one God of all the nations. Prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and Hosea had taught them to see God not as a tribal God, but the God of humanity. Not as the God belonging to Israel, but to whom all history and people's belonged. They had begun to learn that peace and justice and righteousness were not merely God's intended gifts for Israel, but God's intended destiny for all human kind.

This idea was one which was lost on the sophisticated culture of Babylon, still mired in worshipping its national godlings and believing that the only history that mattered was their own, and theirs the only destiny about which their gods cared.

Although from a great historical and religious distance it appears clear that Israel's conception of God was actually more sophisticated than that of the Babylonians, it was probably not so clear at the time. Its easy to loose your bearings in the big city.

One of my roommates in the university took a series of courses on economics, public policy, and foreign policy. And it was almost fun to watch how week by week, semester by semester, his ideals changed to match those of whatever professor he happened to have. After a course in macro-economics he became, for a semester, a hyper capitalist. He argued vehemently that the public good was best served if all government owned property was put in private hands, and that pure market forces would do the most good for the most people. After his course on international relations, taught by a Lyndon Johnson era political advisor, he became convinced that the general public, and indeed congress, was too ignorant to be entrusted with making policy. Everything should be done by professionals with professional knowledge. Democracy was simply another word for incompetence. After a history course with a noted Marxist he became, for a semester, a radical advocate of socialist ideology. And so it went, course after course. Not that I was so much better.

Which of us has not been tempted, in the grip of a charismatic teacher or the lure of wealth and power, to give up values and beliefs that appear naïve and foolish? It happens all the time to individuals in large corporations, at the university, and those caught up in cults and sects. In the 1990's the mantra of increasing shareholder value dominated corporate culture and economic philosophy. We all knelt at that altar. Where did it get us? There is many a professed Christian whose faith says there is more to life than the bottom line, yet whose decisions are based in maximizing profits because that is dominant ideal of the corporate culture in which they work. There is many a pastor who believes in the value of poverty and weakness as personified in Christ, who nonetheless is completely caught up in denominational power struggles. And there

are scientists committed to the truth who will fudge the data and lie about the results because in the Babylon of academia you must publish or perish.

And the message of Isaiah to Israel, and to us, is a reminder that the future of the world we live in and the destiny of humanity is not in Babylon but at Mt. Zion. Israel's world, and our world, will not in the end be conquered for money and power, but will surrender to the justice, righteousness, and glory of the living Lord. *We will not always live in Babylon.* There is a time when in the midst of the darkness of our lives the Lord will say, "rise, shine, your light has come." and we best be prepared to make that pilgrimage back to the promised land. In the meantime it's not a bad thing to keep our hearts and minds oriented toward Zion, oriented toward God.

### III. Where is Zion?

For Christians this passage has another meaning as well. The early Christian church also faced a crisis of identity that centered on an exile from Zion. After the resurrection of Christ most Christians were eventually forced to make a decision. They could remain Jews and renounce their Christianity, or remain Christians and renounce their Judaism. Imagine what it meant to a Jewish Christian to give up all the promises made to Israel. Imagine what it meant to be cast out of the group that would go with rejoicing up to Mt. Zion.

Yet already the Christian community had seen in Christ another meaning to these promises. Peter and Paul in their different ways had heard the Spirit of Christ telling them that he was come not just for the Jews, but for the Gentiles. Christ was, like Zion, a light to the nations. Yet the nations would not need to come to the place where Christ lived. Christians would bear the good news to them. The story of the wise men visiting the child Jesus would be remembered and told to make this clear. Isaiah had promised that the nations of the earth would bring gold and frankincense to Mt. Zion when they great light shown on Israel. Matthew would tell Christians wondering whether they owed their loyalty to Christ or to the temple that under the miraculous star that shown down on the manger kings from among the nations brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh to offer Jesus.

We call this season of the church year Epiphany, meaning the time when the light shines and reveals God in the world. And that light didn't shine on a temple. It shone on a manger, and a child. So Christians knew that in Christ they had and would receive all that they might lose when they were cut off from the Jewish community and its temple. Moreover their concept of God was changed and in many ways enlarged. They realized that God's true home was not a temple on a hill, but in the hearts of believers who would bear God's love to their neighbors and beyond. And the story ends not with a return to the temple, but the command to take that love into all the world.

And there is a message there for us. We may not be particularly drawn to Mt. Zion. But we are all tempted to retreat into nostalgic and cultic religion. We are all tempted to believe that the true faith is the good old "faith of our fathers" and that God is somehow more alive and real back at home than out in the world. We are all tempted to find our faith-identity in the denomination of our parents, or the rituals of our home church, or even in our nationality or ethnicity.

I see this with my students at Webster. If I ask their religion I'll here, "I'm Serbian, so I'm Orthodox." or "I'm Croatian, so I'm Catholic" or "I'm Iranian, so I'm Muslim." One young woman even told me, "I'm Norwegian, so I'm Lutheran – are their other religions?" Of course there are, even in Norway. In fact I can still remember a Norwegian Methodist Bishop at a World Methodist Conference 10 years ago. One of the worship leaders from India used indigenous Indian prayers and songs. The Norwegian bishop complained bitterly that this was "syncretism." If it didn't match his cultural expectations it wasn't really "Methodist", or even Christian.

When we have to make a choice between God that sends us into the world and God that lives back in the familiar surroundings of our home church, it is tempting to just go home, or build a place just like home – just like those Scottish Presbyterians in Malaysia.

And when we are tempted to do this we need to remember that that Jesus wasn't a home boy. Right after the wise men left, Jesus and his parents fled to Egypt. And as soon as he was grown Jesus began a peripatetic ministry that kept him constantly on the move. "Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

Our Lord is wanderer, an exile, a pilgrim, and a pioneer. He gathers us sometimes to be with him, as today. But if we are looking for the place where the light of God shines and reveals his presence. If we are looking for God's future, it isn't here, or back in some beloved past. It is out there beyond those doors, and beyond this day. It is out there where a newborn child is waiting to be loved. It is out there where people live in darkness, waiting to hear the good news, waiting for the light.