

November 29, 2015

Because of All that the Lord Has Done for Us

Annette Hill Briggs

Isaiah 63:7-19

[God's Mercy Remembered]

⁷ I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us, and the great favour to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. ⁸ For he said, 'Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely'; and he became their saviour ⁹ in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

¹⁰ But they rebelled and grieved his holy spirit; therefore he became their enemy; he himself fought against them. ¹¹ Then they remembered the days of old, of Moses his servant. Where is the one who brought them up out of the sea with the shepherds of his flock? Where is the one who put within them his holy spirit, ¹² who caused his glorious arm to march at the right hand of Moses, who divided the waters before them to make for himself an everlasting name, ¹³ who led them through the depths? Like a horse in the desert, they did not stumble. ¹⁴ Like cattle that go down into the valley, the spirit of the Lord gave them rest. Thus you led your people, to make for yourself a glorious name.

[A Prayer of Penitence]

¹⁵ Look down from heaven and see, from your holy and glorious habitation. Where are your zeal and your might? The yearning of your heart and your compassion? They are withheld from me.

¹⁶ For you are our father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O Lord, are our father; our Redeemer from of old is your name. ¹⁷ Why, O Lord, do you make us stray from your ways and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you? Turn back for the sake of your servants, for the sake of the tribes that are your heritage. ¹⁸ Your holy people took possession for a little while; but now our adversaries have trampled down your sanctuary. ¹⁹ We have long been like those whom you do not rule, like those not called by your name.

Here, deep, deep into the poetic preaching of Isaiah, when the people had been in exile a long, long time, he has them finally able to remember and articulate ways in which God had been good and generous and merciful to them, and to admit that they had been stubborn, selfish and unholy, and that their ways were rooted in fear, mostly.

It had taken years: years of exile, of living far from home -- so far that most of them forgot what home was and raised their kids like ordinary Babylonians.

Verse 19 - *We have long been like those whom you do not rule, like those not called by your name.*

But not everyone. Some did remember. And others chose to learn what their parents and grandparents forgot. Sung by the poet-prophet-preacher, it sounded like this (only in Hebrew, of course):

I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us, and the great favour to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. ⁸ For he said, 'Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely'; and he became their saviour ⁹ in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

More prosaically and in English: “Whatever good we have found or been given in this world, whatever is lovely or beautiful, kind or generous, to us and to our kin, originated in the God who made this world and loves it altogether.”

This God who made us and who watches us slaughter each other in word and deed, and yet . . . AND YET! . . . still claims us as his very own sons and daughters, declaring his confidence, HIS FAITH, in the possibility of our goodness, despite all evidence to the contrary.

Isaiah was written, and preached, for a people among a people who were not their people, living in a country that was not their home, even though for most of them it was the only place they'd ever lived. They were strangers, foreigners, aliens, refugees. Around chapter 61, Isaiah begins to invite them to come home, to be at home in their true home, Israel -- a place less geographic than spiritual and relational.

I'd offer the same text to our life together, to remind us that we are also a people among a people who are not our people, in a country -- a world -- that is not our home, in spite of being the only place we've ever lived.

Strangers, foreigners, aliens and refugees, so easily swayed by the words and the wars being waged all around us; a people stubborn and selfish and so very prone to forget who made us and has carried us, bragged on us for good we've not yet done, unfazed by the terrible that we have.

The First Sunday of Advent in the year of our Lord 2015, a blip on the calendar of eternity, and yet everything to those who remember and to those who choose to learn what has been forgotten: that we have been given this life by the Creator of the universe, and however far we have strayed from the Creator's intention for us -- and faith in us -- the

Creator has not lost heart, has not lost confidence in us, in the possibility of our goodness, our capacity to live according to his mercy and the abundance of his steadfast love.

Here we gather, and here we act out the waiting for the Saviour who has already come to us and waits for us to come more fully and more completely to him, to bring him what he wants from us most of all -- which is what, friends?

Everything. Yes, everything.

Would you pray with me?