

“I Will Set a Sign among Them”

In the name of him who admonishes us to strive to enter through the narrow door, dear friends in Christ: Today's Old Testament lesson is the end of Isaiah's extensive prophetic writings. It's missing only the very last verse, which we will eventually get to and for reasons that will be made clear was intentionally left off by those who compiled the systematic lectionary of readings that are appointed for each Sunday. More on that later.

As the text stands, however, it's without question one of the greatest and most explicit evangelistic passages of the Old Testament. It describes how at a time that was then in the future, the Lord would gather to himself people of every nation and tongue and reveal to them his glory. He would put a sign in the midst of his people Israel. And certain individuals identified as “survivors” would go forth from Jerusalem into the far corners of the earth: to Tarshish (which is Spain), to Pul and Lud (which are in Africa), to Tubal and Javan (which are likely Eastern Europe and Greece), and even to distant islands. These survivors would go to all these places where the name of the Lord was unknown, to people who had never heard of him. And they would declare to them his glory. The response would be tremendous. We read of multitudes streaming to the Lord's holy mountain in Jerusalem, coming by every conveyance imaginable: horses, chariots, wagons, mules, camels – the idea is by every means available. And all these masses of people are coming to worship the Lord in his holy Temple.

Again, it's a beautiful image of evangelistic outreach. But try to see it from the perspective of Isaiah's original audience. We are quite used to the idea of sending out missionaries to preach the Gospel in the far flung corners of the globe. But to the Israelites of Isaiah's day, or to the Jews at the time of Christ, this would be an extremely difficult concept to get their heads around. That's because a major emphasis of the Old Testament is how the Lord designated Israel to be his one chosen nation. They were to be a holy people set apart by God, separate and sharply divided from the other nations of the world. And they had a unique relationship with the Lord. To Israel alone he gave his holy Word. With them only did he make his covenant. For them and only for them did he work mighty miracles of deliverance. Through them and no other nation did he promise to bring the Savior into the world. And only in Israel – specifically in his Temple in Jerusalem – did the Lord God make his dwelling place on earth.

And to reinforce and preserve this separateness from other nations, the Lord gave his people a lot of very specific instructions about what they were to eat, and how they were to dress, and how and when they were required to perform certain ceremonial tasks. He wanted them to look and act differently than the peoples of other nations. All these rules and regulations had the effect of forming a barrier between Israel and the rest. They reduced the likelihood of God's faithful people mixing with and being assimilated by other more powerful nations, thus preserving the line that led to Christ.

But the main reason the Lord gave Israel all this special attention was that he wanted them to be his light to the other nations. In this dark world of sin they were to shine forth with the Lord's righteousness. The others were supposed to look at Israel and say, “Wow, what blessed people they are! Their God lives among them. He speaks directly to them. He guides them in his wise and righteous ways. And he forgives them when they fail. Why, I'd sure like to have a God like that! Is there any way for him to be my God too?”

That was the Lord's goal: to draw other peoples to himself through Israel. Unfortunately, as a whole, Israel never quite understood or attained that goal. Quite the contrary, the people of Israel tended to see their special status with the Lord as a mark of their own superiority. "The Lord chose us because we're better than the other nations. Those others are unholy, unclean, little better than dogs. The Lord loves us – and rightly so: we deserve it. But he despises the others. He wants nothing to do with them."

That's pretty much how they thought. And with that in mind, you can see how radically upsetting this passage of Isaiah would be to their worldview. All this talk of people of Gentile nations filling Jerusalem and worshipping at the Lord's Temple would have stunned them. More stunning still is that the Lord calls these people "your brothers." That is, he considers them to be part of the family of Israel. No difference between them and you.

But what really would have stuck in their craw was the Lord saying that he was going to take some of these people and appoint them to be priests and Levites. You see, just as Israel stood closer to the Lord than the rest of the world, so also within Israel there were distinctions. The Lord chose the tribe of Levi to be those who performed ministerial duties: to be the religious teachers, scribes, and Bible scholars. This was a hereditary thing. You had to be born into it. So if you weren't born a Levite, forget it, those jobs were not for you. And then within the tribe of Levi there were the priests, those who actually ministered at the Lord's Temple offering sacrifices and so on. All priests were Levites, but not all Levites were priests. Most of them were not. You had to be born of a priestly family to be a priest. Because of their duties, they stood closest to the Lord of all people. But again, if you were an Israelite from some other tribe, you could never be a Levite much less a priest. So for Isaiah's original audience hearing the Lord say, "Yeah, I'm going to take some of these Gentiles for priests and Levites" – you've got to picture their jaws hitting the floor in shock and horror. "You can't do that, Lord! Why, that's like promoting them and favoring them above us!"

And yes, it's a lot like that. There's a reason for it. The Lord is addressing in this passage *unfaithful* Israel. In a spiritual sense, they had all the advantages. They received all the Lord's special benefits. They had his Word. They had his gracious presence living in their midst. They had the sacrifices for sin. And what did they do with them? They abused and squandered them. They neglected them. They worshipped other gods. They broke all of the Lord's commandments. They didn't care for the poor and needy. They cheated each other in doing business. They were sexually immoral. They corrupted their courts. They gossiped and lied about each other. And the whole while they pridefully thought of themselves as better than others because "God chose us and not them."

This is what the passage is referring to at the beginning where the Lord says, "I know their works and their thoughts." It's precisely because his people Israel are being unfaithful that the Lord says he's going to send out a comparatively small number of survivors to the nations to proclaim his glory and to begin gathering a new Israel to himself, an Israel that isn't based on lineage and genetics, but that is based on faith and trust in him. And what of those who by birth were of Israel and were unfaithful? The Lord says he's going to destroy them. That's what the last verse that was left off this morning's reading says. Speaking of all these Gentiles who have come to worship the Lord in his Temple it says, "And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh."

It's as sharp a word of judgment as can be spoken, which is probably why the folks who came up with the lectionary left it off. It's a bummer. But you see it *needs* to be there. It's a warning calling the unfaithful Israelites to repent and so avoid that terrible fate.

It's the same warning that Jesus issues in today's Gospel to the Jews of his time. They thought they were going to be saved and go into God's kingdom by right of birth. They took their salvation for granted. Jesus warns them, "No." He describes them as being outside the door knocking and being refused entrance. He says they'll be left out where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth and watch in amazement as folks from east and west, north and south go into the kingdom of God.

And to a large extent that's what happened. As he spoke through Isaiah, the Lord did put a sign in the midst of Israel. That sign was this: Jesus the righteous Son of God condemned as a sinner and nailed to a cross. That's where and when the Lord revealed his glory: the glory of his love for a world dying in sin and rebellion against him. And this is the glory of the Lord that the survivors declared among the nations – the survivors being the comparatively few people of Israelite or of Jewish ancestry who came to repentance and faith in Jesus. Most did not. And so most were left out of God's Kingdom.

Their eternal destruction stands as a warning to us. We count ourselves among those Gentiles who have been gathered by the Lord into the Church of Jesus Christ, which is his new Israel. We weren't born into it; rather we were reborn into it by the gift of faith given in Holy Baptism. Then and there the Lord placed his sign upon us: the sign of the cross of Jesus. That cross is the narrow door through which we enter God's kingdom not just once, but every day through repentance for sin and trust in Jesus.

The danger is that like the Israelites of Isaiah's day and the Jews at the time of Christ, we see ourselves as somehow deserving of this special favor the Lord has bestowed on us, that we think of ourselves as better than others, that we take for granted God's gifts of grace, that we neglect his Word and Sacraments, that we continue in sin without repentance, that we fail to let the glory of God's love shine forth in our words and actions – that we do any or all of these things and all the while smugly assume that our salvation is a guaranteed thing.

It's not – and yet it is. It isn't guaranteed in the sense that it can be lost through prideful overconfidence and lack of repentance. It *is* guaranteed only through continued recognition of how weak and sinful we are, and how much we need to rely on the Savior who died in our place. Jesus crucified for our sin is the sign that the Lord has set before us to reveal his glory. And he is the narrow door by which we gain entry to God's kingdom. Let each one of us therefore work out his own salvation with fear and trembling, despairing of self, and fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him despised the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Let our confidence be in him. And to him be all of our thanks and praise forever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!