

Isaiah 49:1-7   2 Epiphany   2.15.26   Bill Uetracht

I grew up in the big city, Cincinnati. Now admittedly, Cincinnati is no New York or Chicago. But the metropolitan area of Cincinnati is quite huge. To go from one side to the other sometimes takes an hour. Bright lights. Big city. But in many ways, my growing up years were years spent in what felt like a small town. In the first eight years of my life we lived on West McKelvey Drive, where my grandfather had had a large farm and where at the time my Aunt Hank, my Aunt Dorothy, My Aunt Viola, my Aunt Edie, and my cousin Jim also lived. When I played, I often played with my cousins. My cousins often came to my swimming pool to swim.

It was a small world. Yet it was secure and dependable. Boundaries were appropriately established most of the time. Love was shared. Fun was had. It was a good world, albeit not a large one. We didn't know many people from other countries or ethnic groups. I am not so sure we knew any Democrats, although we did wonder a little about my Uncle Les, who was a union guy. But as far as we could tell, most of the people we hung around with voted like us. Many of them went to the same church that we did. They liked Pinochle like we did, playing it on Friday nights, drinking beer and smoking cigarettes while doing so. Big city. Small world.

When I was eight, we moved to a new neighborhood, a neighborhood where there were people with more money. In that neighborhood, there were Catholics there, lots of them. They all seemed to have so many kids. And I had a sense there were a few more Democrats there. Mr. Perry, who lived next door, was a federal government worker. We were sure that he voted for Hubert

Humphrey, or as my Dad called him, “Hard-Headed Humphrey.” On Leebrook Drive, the world was starting to get a little bigger.

This is precisely what is happening in the reading from Second Isaiah today. The world is getting bigger. The prophet, whether an individual, a group of individuals, or the whole nation of Israel, we can’t be sure, wants the whole world to know what he now knows. As if he is typing in all caps, he says: “Listen to me, O coastlands; pay attention, you peoples from far away.” The prophet doesn’t want to speak just to the local folks. He wants the far ends of the earth to know what God is doing through him, a local guy, a small group of people, an insignificant nation. This local guy or people is said to be an arrow *hidden* in a quiver. He or they are not big and bossy, out in front of everybody. Rather, they or he are pretty insignificant, hidden. Yet God is using an insignificant prophet. And the world should take note.

But this excited prophet, one who is shouting to the far-off coastlands to take note, also is aware of his limitations and what he perceives to be his failures. “I have labored in vain,” he says; “I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.” I, we have tried to get the exiles back home, to gather them together. And while we have had some luck, not an enormous amount. I have tried to get the family back together again, the local folks, but I haven’t been overly successful.

And God, the one who chose his prophet, these people even before they were born to bring Israel back to him, says: “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

Leave it to God to up the ante, to respond to one who is feeling that his or their work on the local level hasn't been successful, to give him or them a job that is to address the whole world. Failing at my first job at the local level. But God gives me a bigger one to do. Well, thanks, God!

But this is the way it works with the God of the scriptures. What appears to be the end of the story is not the end of the story. Exile is not the end of the story for Israel. God intends Israel to be restored. But the restoration of Israel is not the end of the story either. Amy Oden says that "God's people do not exist for themselves alone, nor is their restoration an end in itself." She claims, "The long arc of God's story points toward the restoration of *all* creation."

In Paul's introduction to his first letter to the Corinthians, he tells them that they are not lacking in any gift that they might need as they wait for *the revealing* of our Lord Jesus Christ. God will strengthen them, he says, so that they may be blameless on *the day* of Jesus Christ. The point is clear. There is more to come.

Some people in the Corinthian community think that they are "the arrived," that they are such spiritually superior people that they don't need anything more. But Paul is telling them, "No." There is more to come. God is going to do something with the whole world, make everything what it ought to be. This is where those who think the Christian message is simply about getting private individuals into heaven really miss the Biblical point. Again, as Amy Oden says, "God's story points to the restoration of all creation." There's more. And the invitation is to live into that more. The small world is not enough.

Now, don't get me wrong. The small world is important. The home, the family, they matter. Actually, for me, the older I become the more I value the local. One of my favorite country songs is "The Red Dirt Road" by Brooks and Dunn, in which Kix and Ronnie sing about their hometown, which is on the red dirt road. They say, "It's where I drank my first beer; It's where I found Jesus. Where I wrecked my first car, and tore it all to pieces, [where] I learned the path to heaven is full of sinners and believers, learned that happiness on Earth ain't just for high achievers."

That hometown, that home family, that home country, that red dirt road, they really matter. And I have a call to them. Isaiah says that he has a call to bring Jacob, his people back to God. There are folks who say they love the people of the world so much, but they just can't stand the folks who live next to them, who are in their family, their local town. Sometimes it is easier to love people in general, who are far away, who don't share any history with you than it is to love the folks who share the same toilet with you, who eat from the same table that you do. Our calling is to the folks in the backyard.

But the call doesn't stop there, because God doesn't stop there. In God, there is always more. In God, the red dirt road goes a long, long, long way, which is why those who think that the love of God is reserved only for those who look like us, act like us, live in our little town or our little country are really missing the spirit of the God of the Biblical word. The God of the Biblical word includes Mr. Perry, those Catholic families with all their children, Somalian, Haitian, Afghani, Ukrainian refugees, the nations close and far off. I am sorry to unsettle you, but the hatred and the suspicion to the foreigner

and the other is not in keeping with who we are as people called out of our little worlds and into a bigger world.

It is too light a thing for you to be my servant to raise up simply the hometown folks, to gather the family together. You are given as a light to the nations. In me, the creator of all, there is always more. I seek the restoration not just of the local folks, but all things and all people.

I love these words of Joan Chittister, and I close with them: “If you want to know where God is, find the space in your heart that is open to all of humankind.”