

Epiphanies of God's Love: God Cares

Sermon 130 | Greystone Baptist Church | January 30, 2022

Isaiah 16:1-5

There's an old story that some of you may already know. About a mother and her son. The son is taking piano lessons and he's pretty new at it. So the mother, wishing to encourage him and show him what potential lies ahead if he sticks with it and continues to practice at home, takes him to a concert where a master pianist is scheduled to perform. After the two are seated, the mother spots a friend in the crowd and makes her way over to say hello. The son, seizes this opportunity to explore the concert hall unencumbered. He meanders through the seats and makes his way through the gathering crowds of people as his mother reconnects with her friend – oblivious to the son's activities. Eventually, the boy walks through a door marked "No Admittance."

Soon, the house lights dimmed signaling that the concert was about to begin. The mother returned to her seat and realized that much to her horror, her little boy was gone. Quickly she scanned the room, turning every direction, hoping to see her son, when at last her eyes were drawn to the stage where the curtains were parting and the spotlight shone brightly on the impressive Steinway centered between them. Innocently, the boy began to play "Chopsticks" as the mother's mind caught up with what her eyes were seeing.

As the mother frantically made her way to the stage, the crowd reacted with anger shouting, "Take the boy away!" "Who would bring such a young boy to a concert such as this?"

The master pianist, still backstage at the time, heard the uproar from the crowd, quickly grabbed his coat and rushed to the stage to see what all of this was about. He was the first to arrive and as he assessed the situation, he knew exactly what to do. He went over to the piano, reached around the little boy and began to improvise a countermelody to the familiar "Chopsticks" tune the boy was playing.

As the two continued to play together, the crowd settled, the mother relaxed, and the master pianist whispered into the little boy's ear, "Keep going. Don't quit son, don't stop... don't stop."

It would have been reasonable for the pianist to take the boy's hand and lead him off stage.

Some might have even considered that kind! It certainly would have been more kind than the reaction of the crowd!

The boy had broken the rules and crossed through the boundary clearly marked "No Admittance." He wasn't supposed to be on the stage at all, much less playing that beautiful and no doubt expensive piano. But there he was.

Faced with the choice, the responsibility, and the power to remedy the situation, the pianist opted not to give the boy what he deserved, but to display radical love and care for this young boy that neither he, nor his mother, nor the crowd would ever forget.

The master pianist's response reminds me of the love of God told throughout scripture. It is a love that surpasses any reasonable expectation, a love that knows no limits, a love that crosses over every boundary. It is a love that expresses itself, wrapping its caring arms around each and every one of us – often when we least deserve it, when there would have been a million more reasonable responses.

This extravagant love of God is the greatest story to which all of scripture points, it is the foundation of our faith, it is the essence of the incarnation, the life and ministry of Jesus, and it is the whole point of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. It is Christianity 101. And yet this extravagant love, is something we so easily forget as we get busy with the rest of our lives.

Today's reading from the prophet Isaiah takes us to the border shared between Israel and Moab. An ancient geo-political boundary that carries tremendous narrative weight in the biblical saga of the Israelites. You may recall some of this history if you are familiar with the books of Leviticus, Judges or Ruth, but even if you aren't, suffice it to say that the Moabites are *persona non grata* in ancient Israel. They, like the Samaritans of Jesus' parables, have a sordid history and questionable origins. They are unclean, unwanted, and unworthy in the eyes of Israel.

This is important to remember as we approach this ancient border and listen to the words of the prophet.

If we were to go back and read chapter 15, we would understand a bit about what is happening in Moab. Something awful has taken place and Moab is in shambles. The prophet Isaiah writes: *Moab is undone... Moab wails... in the streets they bind on sackcloth;.. everyone wails and melts in tears... a cry has gone out around the land of Moab; the wailing reaches to Beer-elim. For the waters of Dibon are full of blood...* This doesn't sound good.

And so as chapter 16 begins (the reading for today) the survivors of Moab's destruction, primarily the women and children, have fled and escaped the violence. Now, these daughters of Moab have arrived at the border.

*Like fluttering birds,
like scattered nestlings,
so are the daughters of Moab*

The prophet writes.

Their arrival forces the Israelites to make a decision about how they will respond to this crisis.

Isaiah, prophet to the King, offers his advice:

*Like fluttering birds,
like scattered nestlings,
so are the daughters of Moab...*

*Give counsel,
grant justice;
make your shade like night
at the height of noon;
hide the outcasts,
do not betray the fugitive;
let the outcasts of Moab
settle among you;
be a refuge to them from the destroyer.*

Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, *The Message*, says it this way:

*Give the refugees from Moab sanctuary with you.
Be a safe place for those on the run from the killing fields.*

and then Peterson continues...

When all this is over... A new government of love will be established [in the tradition of David]...

This idea, this promise of a Davidic rule, a king established over Israel who would rule with justice and righteousness was the ultimate goal in which the Israelites placed their hope. It was the ultimate dream of life together. And yet here, it seems like there is work to be done before any of that can take place, before any of that even matters. Here, the most urgent work, the most urgent calling of God's chosen people is to tend to the outcasts at their border, to hide those who seek shelter in Israelite land, to make their shade like night at the height of noon, to reach their arms around the Moabites and embrace them with the love and care of God.

Then, Isaiah says, when all this is behind us, *then* we can worry about the other things.

Like the master pianist who saw another way forward, a better, more caring approach, when the boy who hadn't earned his seat on the stage began to play *Chopsticks*, the Israelite prophet (speaking for God, no less) sees another way forward, a better, more caring approach than those traditionally espoused by governments and political leaders. Here, Isaiah says, do not close your eyes or turn your backs, do not conveniently forget that they are there, but let them hide among you. Welcome them in, give them rest, care for them and help them through this difficult moment. We can worry about the other things later.

While we cannot ignore the challenging call to action that this text offers to us today, there is another calling that I want to lift up out of the text today.

A few weeks ago we talked a bit about where we place ourselves in the text when we are reading the Bible, and how that can change its whole meaning and application. Well, this is another prime example. We might sometimes place ourselves among the Israelites when reading these ancient stories. When we feel a part of God's people, God's community, God's beloved, God's chosen ones, we identify with the Hebrew people. But it is helpful to remember that we are not (by birth or by creed) Israelites. We are Gentiles, foreigners, neighbors who may want to be friends... but we are not Israelites. So for the purposes of today's reading, we could begin to see ourselves in the shoes of the Moabites.

And furthermore, what is remarkable about this perspective is that the God of Israel is so concerned with the Moabite, the foreigner, the outcast, the struggle-born, that God is willing to put everything on hold with his beloved flock, to reach out an arm and welcome the stranger in.

Now on a good day, we might not identify too much with the Moabites. After all, there are so many others who are worse off than we are. Those who are poor, hungry, sick, and grieving.

But I've got to tell you, there are days when we too need a safe place to run and hide, a refuge from the killing fields of life. And isn't it just amazing, that ours is a God who sees fit to pause on everything else, just to welcome a straggler in, to reach out God's arm, to wrap it around us when we are broken, and exhausted, and struggling with everything life has thrown our way, and to cover us in care that knows no comparison. Yes, God cares for us, just as God cares for the Israelites *and* the Moabites. God cares for us and God's care knows no boundaries, it cannot be earned by any measure of piety, or good theology, or good deeds. If God can transcend the hatred at the border between two mortal enemies like Moab and Israel, then God can certainly interrupt our most difficult moments, our most broken moments, our less than perfect lives with an invitation to come and rest, to come and hide, to come and refill our souls in the refuge of God's arms. God cares for us, each and every one.