

Isaiah 61:10-62:5

South Plains

December 28, 2008

1st Sunday after Christmas

Someone Delights in You

During the time I lived in Tennessee, Middle Tennessee State University decided that it did not want to be a “state university.” It wanted to be known instead as The University of Middle Tennessee, a subtle change in identity that they hoped would indicate their maturity as the second largest university in the state. It’s very much like the time Virginia Polytechnic Institute changed its colloquial name to Virginia Tech. Isaiah 62 is all about getting a new identity and a new name.

Name changes are not unusual. As we grow, we develop distinct talents and assume new roles and we need to revise our identity. A few years ago, I got a stack of resumes on my desk applying for a job at the church. I sorted out the best candidates and began emailing a reply. I was stopped in my tracks by one email address. This candidate used an email address that may have been harmless in school, but was right on the edge of inappropriate for a real job. She had not assumed her adult identity.

A new name signals a new identity and adds momentum to the change as we re-define ourselves. Some people change names, others change hairstyles. Presto! A new you. This is the time of year we resolve to live into a new identity for 2009.

Of course, none of the superficial changes amount to a hill of beans unless they are accompanied by substantial changes in the way we act, the way we think and especially in the way we feel about ourselves. The way we feel about ourselves had a lot of influence of how we act and think. God has a strategy for making new people. It’s counter-cultural because it starts with the premise that who we are grows out of where we come from. God puts us in a community, the community of the people of God, and he never stops reminding us that it’s a community of grace and salvation. That’s where we come from: the people of God, the church.

When Isaiah the prophet was alive and working, his people needed a new identity in the worst way. They were a community been beaten down by military defeats, beaten down by economic losses, and beaten down further by the political humiliation of forced exile in Babylonia. By the time our prophecy was written, the exile was over, but the smell of failure and loss remained. When I was twelve, I crossed swords with a skunk. I got myself clean, but my clothes never lost the smell. If you have ever experienced deep, personal failure or loss in your job, marriage or family, then you have at least an inkling of what the people of Israel felt when they heard these words from Isaiah 62.

To down and out folks who thought they were finished, Isaiah says,

I will not keep silent,... until your [Jerusalem’s]

Vindication shines out like the dawn, and
Your [her] salvation like a burning torch. (62:1)
Good news! You've got a friend who will stick with you.

Here is the first strategy God will use to give a new identity to the people: The new assurance of ultimate vindication. Salvation will come. It's a Cinderella story. There is no doubt in the prophet's mind about the outcome. God will rescue Israel from the doldrums, and restore her fortunes, and take away her shame. God delights in Israel and shall rejoice over her.

Can you remember a time in your life when someone expressed sheer delight over you? When just the sight of you brought a smile? Perhaps when your grandmother sees you and breaks into a grin? God takes that kind of pleasure in seeing his people. It's not because we're so good or successful. God loves us because we belong to God. The Gospel reading records Simeon's delight that he had lived long enough to see the prophecy of Isaiah fulfilled, a light to the Gentiles and the salvation of the people. God's assurance of salvation told Simeon that his dreams would come true even if he did not live to see them. Assurance of the future is God's first strategy.

The second strategy God uses for giving Israel a new identity is to give her new names. Now, I have to admit these are not the names you will see in the nursery in 2009. You might name a cat Hephzibah, but probably not a child. Beulah still works, but it's definitely out of

style. They are Hebrew words that point to the delight God takes in us. They tell us God pleasure is akin to the delight of a newly married couple on their honeymoon. You know how honeymooners can be. Every quirk is endearing. Every word is either profound or funny. And, introductions often come with a giggle. "I'd like you to meet my wife." Smile and laugh. That is the fascination of God's love affair with the people of God from the beginning of time. Hephzibah means "my delight is in her." Beulah means "married." Our friend was named "Holly" because she was a Christmas baby. At baptism, we receive a new name: we are "Christian."

I think in the coming year we need to remember just how much God loves us. In the economic stress of these times, we need the assurance not only of God's salvation, but also of the sheer delight God takes in you and me. I will grant you that we do not always live up to the name "Christian." We may even embarrass the church as well as family and friends when we get into trouble. The good news is that God is beyond embarrassment. God loves us anyway.

After all, God has seen his people stumble and fall on their faces, and has endured the humiliation of the death of his Son as the hands of his own people. Yet, God continues to love his people. If Isaiah is to be believed at all, God delights in us.

Those of us who are ministers in the church have a special duty to communicate that holy delight when we

are leading worship. Elders need to keep that delight in the front of our minds when we are caught in the crossfire of the church conflicts. Teachers and youth leaders need to imagine God smiling ear to ear especially when we struggle with behavior problems. Whatever else we say, and sometimes we have to say hard words to each other in the church, whatever else we say, we need to say with Isaiah that “God shall rejoice over you (62:5).”

When we take that new name “Christian” at our baptism and when we accept the assurance of God’s love that is ours in Jesus Christ, then we can enjoy our new identity in Christ. We can rest in God’s affection. That resting, that confident basking in the favor of God is what it means to have faith. And, that’s why faith is so difficult for some of us.

When we can enjoy being the object of God’s delight ourselves, then we can share that delight with others. We cannot be silent about God’s pleasure. Delight is contagious. Then, we know our real identity is God’s beloved.

That’s who we are as the church of Jesus Christ: we are the people in whom God delights. Because that joy is real and wonderful, we tell the story of God’s love to everyone who will listen. We invite neighbors to come to church, not because South Plains is full of neat people (which we are, of course), but because God’s happiness in this people is neat. We send money around the world in order to insure that Dr. Sue Makin, our missionary in

Malawi, can share that delight with her Ob-gyn patients. We send food to the food bank because a meal says, “I care about you.” We sent greetings to Grenada Presbyterians because sharing the joy of God’s Christmas delight multiplies our sense of well-being in the knowledge that Christ comes to us.

Someone will ask, “How do I get a new identity? How do I become a new person that is really different from the old person I’m not always happy to be?” The answer starts with the recognition that you are the object of God’s delight.