

## THE MARRIAGE METAPHOR

“SO SHALL YOUR GOD REJOICE OVER YOU.”

A Sermon by Rev. Victor H. Floyd  
January 20, 2018

### Isaiah 62:1-5

*For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,  
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,  
until her vindication shines out like the dawn,  
and her salvation like a burning torch.  
The nations shall see your vindication,  
and all the kings your glory;  
and you shall be called by a new name  
that the mouth of the Lord will give.  
You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the  
Lord,  
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.  
You shall no more be termed Forsaken,  
and your land shall no more be termed Desolate;  
but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her,  
and your land Married;  
for the Lord delights in you,  
and your land shall be married.  
For as a young man marries a young woman,  
so shall your builder marry you,  
and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,  
so shall your God rejoice over you.*



### POETIC LANGUAGE

This week, the world lost a beautiful poet, Mary Oliver, who wrote:

When it's over, I want to say: all my life  
I was a bride married to amazement.  
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder  
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.  
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,  
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.<sup>1</sup>

A groom taking the world into my arms, a bride married to amazement—these are metaphors, poetic language employed by mere mortals when we want to describe something immortal, but we hit the limit of language, where words cannot express the awesomeness of what we feel. John Spong writes:

When [the authors of the Bible] began to write about... transforming experience[s,] they confronted a problem. How could the human mind, which can only think using human vocabulary, stretch far enough to embrace the God-presence they had experienced in this life? How could

<sup>1</sup> “When Death Comes” (excerpt) by Mary Oliver, accessed online at <<https://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/102.html>> (January 18, 2019)

mere words be big enough to capture this divine meaning? Inevitably, as they wrote they lapsed into poetry and imagery.<sup>2</sup>

Today's lesson from Third<sup>3</sup> Isaiah, is penned by a prophet who is also a poet. In Isaiah 62, written after the Babylonian exile, Isaiah's God, our God says, "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest."<sup>4</sup> Now, Zion is Judah-Jerusalem. Later in Christian thought the term Zion represents the heavenly city, the dominion of God, the kingdom at hand.

### CAN GOD BE "OUT OF THE OFFICE?"

But why is God talking about talking? Don't we believe that God is still speaking? Eight chapters earlier, in Isaiah 54:7, God admits to God's metaphorical wife, Judah: "For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you." God confessed to abandoning the people!

In Tony Kushner's masterpiece, *Angels in America*, is based on the same supposition that, in the midst of the AIDS crisis, God throws up the divine hands, and leaves all the work to the angels. God walks off the job: no two-week notice, no meals left labeled in the fridge, no away message. Just gone. God quits. Think of how the characters grow in *Angels in America*.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps God sometimes leaves the picture in order for us to learn. I have never experienced this, but Isaiah assures us that when God is absent, it's only for a "brief moment." God comes back to help pick up the pieces and rebuild. That's how I have experienced God. How about you?

### THIRD ISAIAH: SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Let's locate this scripture in history. Nearly six-hundred years before Jesus, his religious forebears were carted off, leaving communities in chaos and families decimated. For over fifty years, God's people were exiled from their Judean homes, deported into Iraq, then called Babylon, and held in old-school Babylonian detention centers.

In the year 539 BCE, King Cyrus begins to release the exiles in waves. Can you imagine the excitement? We're free. We're returning home. But. They return to a Jerusalem that is utterly destroyed. Sure, some of them had not been marched away on the humiliating trail, up through the northern kingdom, then east to the Euphrates; some had been left to live there in a city that verse four of today's reading calls Forsaken & Desolate. The exiles hoped to return to the ways things used to be. Don't we all pine for what we've left behind?<sup>6</sup>

### FROM BREXIT TO THE PARIS ACCORD

I long for the world as it was just recently. Over the past several years, an evil wind has toppled our nation's grandest experiments in peacetime military cooperation<sup>7</sup> and political equity.<sup>8</sup> Who would have ever imagined that our country would separate and then exile thousands of children from their parents? Even in the Bay Area, parents have been carted away under stealth of night. This is a moral concern that Calvary has signed on<sup>9</sup> to help bring to light and, with God's help, work to end. Anyone can get involved with our sanctuary ministry.<sup>10</sup> But think ahead. What will the scars look like in the future? Our government's current cruelty will play out for the rest of our lifetimes.

Like a runaway bride returning to the altar just in time to say "I do," the Jews return from Babylon to surprising chaos. A bride may jump into the ceremony just in time, but the damage of her absence has already been

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<sup>2</sup> John Shelby Spong, "Question & Answer" December 22, 2016, <accessed online at <<https://progressingspirit.com/2016/12/22/the-terrible-texts-be-fruitful-and-multiply-and-subdue-the-earth-originally-posted-august-2003/>> (January 12, 2019)

<sup>3</sup> Learn about Third Isaiah online from Peter Enns at <<http://thecenterforbiblicalstudies.org/resources/introductions-to-the-books-of-the-bible/isaiah/>> (January 20, 2019)

<sup>4</sup> 62:1

<sup>5</sup> Tony Kushner's masterpiece is available on <<https://www.amazon.com/Angels-in-America-Season-1/dp/B00D6PP9LQ>> Amazon Prime—required viewing (or reading) for San Francisco residents who want to love and understand their LGBTQ neighbors of a certain age. We've "been through the great ordeal." (Revelation 7:13-14)

<sup>6</sup> As in *Angels in America* <<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/165781-night-flight-to-san-francisco-chase-the-moon-across-america>> (January 18, 2019)

<sup>7</sup> <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/14/us/politics/nato-president-trump.html>>

<sup>8</sup> <<https://www.theguardian.com/law/2019/jan/04/trump-administration-un-human-rights-violations>>

<sup>9</sup> Calvary is a Sanctuary Congregation, access details online at <<https://calvarypresbyterian.org/15025-2/>> (January 18, 2019)

<sup>10</sup> Email <[stephanie.m.gee@gmail.com](mailto:stephanie.m.gee@gmail.com)> or <[stephanie.m.gee@gmail.com](mailto:stephanie.m.gee@gmail.com)> or me <[victorfloyd@calpres.org](mailto:victorfloyd@calpres.org)> and we will help you help refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants neighbors in need.

done. Yes, reconciliation is possible, but it won't be quick and easy. If South Africa can do it, surely we can at least try.

## THE MARRIAGE METAPHOR IN THE BIBLE

This marriage metaphor is cooked into the Hebrew scriptures. In Hosea, God's wife is the northern kingdom. When that marriage goes south, Hosea blames it on, you guessed it ladies, the wife! The prophet Jeremiah later hops on the marriage metaphor, describing Babylon's trouncing of Jerusalem what rightfully happens to a broken family. And Jeremiah blames this divorce on, oh let's see, the wife. In the first chapter of the Book of Lamentations, Judah, as God's wife, accepts the premise that she is (always) at fault, but after thinking it over, the blame shifts to Bridegroom-God by chapter 2.<sup>11</sup> Sister can get it together when she need to. We can bounce back.

Columbia Seminary biblical scholar Kathleen O'Connor writes that Isaiah uses "the poetic figure of God's wife...as a symbol of [a] broken nation." But she continues with the truly good news: "God promises to bring her back, reunite her disappeared children to her, and resume their relationship, even confessing to have abandoned her."<sup>12</sup>

If you are or have ever been in a committed relationship of any kind for any length of time, some of this sounds familiar. Yes, poetry speaks *concurrent* levels. May you hear it today where you need it most, as a significant other—or as a citizen of God's world.

## CHANGE MY NAME

Isaiah goes on to say that God will salvage our reputation, changing our name from Desolate and Forsaken into two great Southern names: Hepzubah and Beulah. Hepzubah means "My Delight is in Her" and Beulah means "married" or more relevantly "in a committed relationship" which, for women in Bible times, meant safe and protected. Isaiah assures us that the healing of this long-suffering relationship is at hand, and reconciliation will be as sweet as the honeymoon.

## MLK DAY

The picture on the cover of your bulletin had me smiling all week. Coretta Scott kissing Martin King, who is swooning with joy—a marriage for the ages, a partnership that still transforms and transcends this world. Like Jesus, Dr. King's "enemies conspired to remove him and his threat to them. From one perspective it might be said that they killed him. When one looks more closely at the story, however, it might be more accurate to say that he found in himself the freedom to give his life away and to do so quite deliberately."<sup>13</sup> There is no greater love than this, to lay down one's life...<sup>14</sup> I know what you're thinking, but was he a good, well-behaved husband? History says no, but let's leave that between Martin and Coretta. They worked through it. We're busy enough with our own relationships, our own brokenness. God uses real people to transform the world!

For our sake, God will not be silent. For the sake of God's world, oh you church, you Body of Christ, do not rest on blessed assurances, do not keep silent. We are in this marriage together, and God's love is ours to claim and to share. God is ready to commit. Are we? Why do we hesitate?

Time is passing. Nothing lasts forever. Living takes "it" out of us. So, reconcile now before death comes for the people you love. Not everyone grows old enough to proclaim, like Carol Channing: "The first 80 years are the hardest."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Kathleen O'Connor, *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000) Location 8609, Kindle Edition, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> John Shelby Spong, "Question & Answer" December 22, 2016, <accessed online at <<https://progressingspirit.com/2016/12/22/the-terrible-texts-be-fruitful-and-multiply-and-subdue-the-earth-originally-posted-august-2003/>> (January 12, 2019)

<sup>14</sup> In John 15:13, Jesus says, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

<sup>15</sup> Like Mary Oliver, Carol Channing died days before this sermon.

## MOVIE NIGHT

Now, extend the marriage metaphor to our country, right now. We must reconcile our divisions and its daily cultivation. We can restore the dream — and we must. Here's some more homework for your MLK Day observances. Go to see the movie *If Beale Street Could Talk*.<sup>16</sup> Based on the novel by James Baldwin, it tells of two African American families circa 1971, Harlem in New York City. A couple of twenty-somethings who have grown up as neighbors and childhood playmates discover that they are in love. They decide to commit to one another (*beulah*). The movie is brilliant and devastating—a tragedy that was forged in the fire of our country's history of chattel slavery, what Condoleezza Rice call's our country's "birth defect."<sup>17</sup> As the credits roll at the end of *If Beale Street Could Talk*, a familiar song began playing, in a style that left me an introspective mess. At first I didn't recognize it; then, I heard it again for the first time. Since this church learns theology through music, here is the song. I will attempt my version of Billy Preston. Just forgive me in advance. I've asked Jose<sup>18</sup> to come and help me out.

On this national holiday celebration, this is a prayer for our nation.

*I sing:*

My country tis of thee<sup>19</sup>  
Sweet land of liberty  
Of thee I sing;  
Land where my fathers died,  
Land of the pilgrims' pride,  
From ev'ry mountainside  
Let freedom ring!

*José Hernández sings:*

Mi país, es sobre ti,  
dulce tierra de libertad,  
sobre ti yo canto;  
tierra donde mis padres murieron,  
tierra del orgullo de los peregrinos,  
desde cada ladera de la montaña  
¡que suene la libertad!

*All sing:*

**Let music swell the breeze,  
And ring from all the trees  
Sweet freedom's song;  
Let mortal tongues awake;  
Let all that breathe partake;  
Let rocks their silence break,  
The sound prolong.**

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<sup>16</sup> Information <<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7125860/>> (January 20, 2019)

<sup>17</sup> <https://thehill.com/homenews/news/332307-condoleezza-rice-says-america-was-born-with-a-birth-defect-slavery>

<sup>18</sup> José Hernandez is the Calvary Choir's current tenor section leader. My personal thanks to him for constructing a singable version in Spanish.

<sup>19</sup> Samuel Francis Smith, "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" Variants of this national hymn, including an anti-slavery version, available online at <[https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/My\\_Country,\\_%27Tis\\_of\\_Thee](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/My_Country,_%27Tis_of_Thee)> (January 13, 2019)