



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Deep Wells”

Isaiah 12

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Our scripture reading for this morning comes from the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Turn with me to Isaiah 12 (p.609) in your pew Bibles.

Now, I have to give you warning – to understand this passage fully, we’re going to need to get into the weeds a little bit. Trust me, it will be worth it.

Isaiah is believed to have been written by at least two different people, possibly three. It’s clear to see a distinction in the different writers, and there is a general agreement that Isaiah 1-39 was written by one author, and chapters 40 on were written by a second. The two authors refer to two very different periods in Israel’s history and use different language and writing styles. To distinguish the authors, scholars have given them the names First Isaiah and Second Isaiah.

Our passage for today, Isaiah 12, is a particularly fun text to explore because even though it is in that First Isaiah territory of chapters 1-39, it was actually written later by Second Isaiah – it was added, inserted into the scroll. That is, Second Isaiah literally inserted Isaiah 12 into First Isaiah’s story.

First Isaiah covers the period when God’s people were living under Assyrian domination. But Isaiah 12 was written, inserted in, when the people were returning from Babylonian exile.¹ Isaiah 12 looks to the day when the peace of God will finally be established upon the earth.

¹ Elizabeth Webb. “Commentary on Isaiah 12:2-6.” *Working Preacher*. WorkingPreacher.org. 16 Dec. 2012. Web. 1 Feb. 2018.



“Banksy” is the pseudonym claimed by an unnamed, modern-day graffiti artist in the UK. Banksy is known for provocative and beautiful graffitied images that make people stop in their tracks or see something in a new way. For instance, he’s spray-painted the image of a young girl, floating over the wall in the West Bank with a handful of balloons, as well as the image of a masked rioter reared back to throw not a grenade or a Molotov cocktail, but a bouquet of flowers. I like to think of Second Isaiah a bit like a Bible time Banksy. Second Isaiah literally inked in, or graffitied, something beautiful into the prophet’s Isaiah’s scroll. Let’s take look at the passage together...

Isaiah 12 (NRSV)

¹You will say on that day:

I will give thanks to you, O LORD,
for though you were angry with me,
your anger turned away,
and you comforted me.

² Surely God is my salvation;

I will trust, and will not be afraid,
for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.

³ With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

⁴ And you will say on that day:

Give thanks to the LORD,
call on his name;
make known his deeds among the nations;
proclaim that his name is exalted.

⁵ Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously;
let this be known in all the earth.

⁶ Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Many years ago, a teacher told me that my role as a minister and a Christian educator is to dig deep wells. “Dig deep wells,” she said, “and the cattle never wander.” What she meant by that statement was that the church’s role is to provide deep living water, not shallow, shiny, gimmicky programs – but deep, meaningful worship and education.

We all have wells inside of us that need filling. And what we choose to fill ourselves with matters. It matters because there will come time in which we will have to draw on that water – so it needs to be something of substance.



Second Isaiah is writing to a people returning from exile. Generations have passed, and God's people who were forced out and the ones that remained in the land under Babylonian domination no longer recognized one another. The children and grandchildren don't remember the stories and the songs of their forefathers. They speak, dress, and act like Babylonians. Those things that had made them distinct as a people of God had begun to fade away.

It is in midst of this season of confusion and loss that Second Isaiah scrolls into the margins with these words. He says about God, paraphrasing *The Message* version of the text, "God, you moved in and comforted me. You are my salvation, my strength, and my song!"

Second Isaiah's strategy is to create faith in the doubtful and unbelieving exiles by calling them to praise God. The passage, in essence, is a psalm. All of Israel's songs of thanksgiving are present here. OT scholar Rolf Jacobson asks us to consider: Is it easier to say to a person who is struggling with their faith, "You just have to believe," or is it easier to say, "Let's pray"? Is it more effective to admonish someone, "Trust in God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your strength!", or is it more effective to say, "Let's sing this hymn together: 'Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see'"?²

What Isaiah 12 does is essentially invite the exiles to sing the songs of their people that celebrate Israel's repeated experiences of God's deliverance. Consider the note in your bulletin insert. In these three places from Isaiah 12, we can see Second Isaiah pulled from the shared text of the Hebrew Bible. He's using familiar words, familiar songs to remind these returned Israelites who they are, where they come from, and to point to the One who promises a new future.

Isaiah 12:1a

I will give thanks to you, O Lord

Psalms 138:1a

I will give thanks to you, O Lord

Isaiah 12:2

Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid,

Psalms 27:1

The Lord is my light and my salvation...
Of whom shall I be afraid?

Isaiah 12:5

Sing praises to the Lord,
for he has done gloriously!

Exodus 15:21

Sing to the Lord,
for he has triumphed gloriously!

We often say in our Presbyterian tradition that we sing our theology. Isaiah is doing just that. He is teaching the people the story in this hymn of praise. He is calling on their shared history and theology through the hymns that shape them, reminding them of their experience with the God of Exodus and of promise. Isaiah is drawing on their well of shared history.

"Dig deep wells," the saying goes, "and the cattle never wander."

He is hoping that they might remember...

² Jacobson, 15 Dec. 2015.



- narratives of God’s miraculous provision of water for desperate people like Hagar and Ishmael (Genesis 21:19) and the Israelites in the Exodus (Exodus 17:1-7);
- water as a metaphor for salvation (Isaiah 35:6-7 and 55:1; Ezekiel 47:1-12);
- and water as representative of the very presence of God with individuals (Psalm 42:1 and 63:1) and with communities (Isaiah 44:3).³

These are the “wells of salvation,” deep wells from which the people will draw. These memories and shared stories will help restore their faith in this time of exile and struggle.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Russia had the largest Jewish population in the world, with the majority of the world’s Jews living within its borders. Persecution in the early 1900’s led over 2 million Jews to flee the country. A young girl named Anna was among those driven out of their homes by the czar’s soldiers. Anna’s family was only able to pack a few household goods and religious artifacts into their cart before setting out on foot for the long journey to America. Among their most prized possessions was a beautiful tea set, which served as a reminder of the blessings of family.

The tea set was no ordinary piece of China. The family told and retold one another the words of the note which came with the colorful set as a wedding gift, “Anyone who drinks from it has a blessing from God. They will never know a day of hunger. Their lives will always have flavor. They will know love and joy ... and they will never be poor.”

Along the family’s journey, Anna’s father grew ill. A kind doctor took the family in and nursed Anna’s father back to health. The doctor then generously bought the family passage to America. To thank the kind doctor, the family gave the precious tea set to him – all but one cup – assuring him that the tea set would bless him, just as they knew the one cup would do for them.

Over time, this one remaining cup became known to the family as “the blessing cup.”⁴ It was an anchor for their family’s story, and it would remain a symbol of lasting love more than 100 years later. The true magic of that tea cup was not in the cup itself but was in the gift of community. When the family gathered week after week on the Sabbath to share their meal together, the tea cup drew them to the story of their past and gave them hope for their future. This community was something sacred. The simple cup, the community it represented and the stories it reminded them of, drew them to remember who they were, whose they were, and the One that had never forsaken them, even in the midst of exile and deep loss.

The people of Israel knew the pain of being cast out of their homeland. They had lost their homes and much of their possessions. They had grown weary and had forgotten their God and the faith that bound them together. It is easy for a dispossessed group of people to begin to lose their identity. “But remember,” Isaiah is saying:

² Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid,

³ Webb, 16 Dec. 2012.

⁴ Patricia Polacco, *The Blessing Cup*, (New York: Simon & Schuster Children’s Publishing: 2013).



for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.

³ With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

It may seem a strange hymn to sing in the midst of such desolation, but Isaiah is singing to his people the song of the Lord.

On September 11, I remember watching the news all day long. One scene I will never forget was the image of New Yorkers, gathered in a circle, each individual covered in dust, looking tattered and worn. As the camera panned the street, you could see the men and women holding hands. Listening closer, you could hear them singing. I knew the song, I remembered the lyrics. Their voices carried softly over the muffled sound of chaos around them...

“When we’ve been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We’ve no less days to sing God’s praise
Than when we first begun.”

With literal destruction all around them, they sang of salvation and grace, of a God that will never leave or forsake his people – not even in the midst of desolation and destruction all around.

“Dig deep wells...”

This is what I imagine for the Israelites when I read Isaiah 12. Their time in exile had them in clothes their forefathers would not have recognized, speaking a language and singing songs that hold no history for them as God’s people. So when Second Isaiah calls them to remember their story, I can imagine the pull on their heartstrings, the yearning in the faint remembrance of who they once were – who they still are – and of the God who still holds them, even there, far from home.

³ With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. (NRSV)

...

⁶ The greatest lives among you: The Holy of Israel. (MSG)

Isaiah is calling God’s people to pay attention and remember their story, to give thanks, and to find deep joy again. God’s well will never run dry. Even in the desolation of exile, we give thanks. Even in a godforsaken place, we can call on God’s name.

Thanks be to God.

