

Isaiah 51:1-6 (Hymn 724:1-5)

God spoke these words through Isaiah for generations not yet born, primarily for those of Judah who would be sent into “Exile” in Babylon about 150 years later. These are words of comfort and hope for those who feel far from home, isolated, abandoned, alone, powerless, hemmed in, threatened, perhaps near death and “exiled”. These are words for missionaries in a far away land: not with loved ones, isolated from that which is familiar or comfortable, sure, reliable, well known, dependable, true or trustworthy. It is natural that a missionary would be filled with fear.

In Judah at the time of Isaiah, the nation was in decline, yet the wealthy were still quite well off, living in luxury and enjoying the ease of life. Isaiah, having rebuked the unbelief, idolatry and running after the temporal, the carnal, the things that moth and rust destroy, now turns his attention in Isaiah 51 and 52 to the penitent who long for righteousness and justice. These are those who long for the spiritual, the fear of God and proper worship of God, a humble nation that repents and seeks to live according to God’s will in all that it does. Isaiah is writing to those who lament the waywardness of a family member, the waywardness of a community, nation and even their church.

You don’t have to be a missionary to be alone or in exile. Perhaps you feel alone for having cut yourself off from God through your own bad choices, vices, habits or addictions. Perhaps you have a longing for Righteousness, but you just don’t know what to do. You are powerless. Perhaps you feel alone because you have cut yourself off from loved ones in a fit of anger or frustration. Perhaps illness has become a burden too big for you or someone you love to bear. There could be a myriad of reasons for feeling alone.

What is key here is that God through Isaiah is speaking to those who as penitent sinners recognize their loneliness, aloneness or isolation. God through Isaiah reaches out to you in your helplessness, captivity, bondage, guilt, and exile and says to you: Look at where you come from; consider from where you came.

In our family some 25 or more nieces and nephews have gone off to the university and the common advice given to them by their Christian parents, aunts and uncles is this: Remember where you come from; consider what made you who you are: your baptism, your life in the church through the means of grace, this is your identity.

To the penitent Israelite crying out for a reason to hope, God through Isaiah says something even stronger: Consider Abraham your father and Sarah who bore you. The Hebrew here is very brief. It could be translated “One I called, blessed and multiplied.” Even the word “one” in the grammatical structure stands out in an apparent isolation. And how was that “one”? The “one” was Abraham and Sarah together as one flesh. But they were old, sterile, barren, without hope, and no reason whatsoever to expect anything but to have Abraham’s line cut off from the face of the earth. Not just alone, but desolate.

But to Abraham and to all those who feel as though they are in a “waste place”, a wilderness, a desert, God says “I can, I will and I do make all things new. From your hopelessness and despair I make a

Garden of Eden.” God delights in taking you from your exile, isolation, helplessness and hopelessness and making a Garden for Himself where there is joy, gladness, thanksgiving and song. That’s the work God really relishes – not taking the great and making greater, but exalting that which is lowly. That’s the way He works.

Whether you are a missionary on the other side of the globe, or wife of a missionary or a child of a missionary, or if you are in isolation and despair while walking the streets of St. Louis or the halls of the International Center, God’s first and last word to you in your despair is a word of mercy. Mercy is always aimed at the unworthy, helpless and the hopeless, otherwise it is not mercy. Sure you are lost and not worthy of God’s presence, laid bare and helpless, but so it was in your Baptism. But that didn’t stop God. He still came in the Word with the water and made you His dear child by burying you in baptism with His Son that you might be raised again, clothed in Christ’s righteousness and made a member of the communion of saints. So now in your sin and rebellion, while you are at enmity with God, Christ still carried your sin willingly to Calvary, where those sins were nailed on a cross. Your helplessness or rebellion didn’t stop Christ. Again, so it is now, your loneliness helplessness will not stop God. His mercy comes to you.

“Give attention to me people. Give ear to me. Listen up. When all is crumbling down around you, and you feel as though you are at the edge of the abyss, look at how I do my Work. I delight in making the isolated, unworthy ‘one’ many and filled with joy. Look up to the heavens and look down to the earth. All that is in them will go away like a mist, but My Righteousness and My Salvation will endure forever.” Christ’s righteousness and salvation are real and they are here, and they are yours by grace received by faith, and they will accompany you in your ministry to the ends of the earth for those who are **truly alone**, walking in darkness not knowing their Lord and Savior.

In your baptism you were alone, in confession and in a sense as you kneel to receive the Lord’s Body and Blood in contrition you are alone in your sin, but God enters in, He calls you by the Gospel, He blesses and makes you many. You are baptized into Christ’s body, you are absolved with all the saints, you receive the Lord’s Supper not just with those who are kneeling at your side, but with Angels and Archangels and all the company of heaven. You are never alone. That’s true here and yes even in your Divine Service in the far corners of the earth where you are gathered together with two or three, or even in that Service done with your family or other missionary families. You are never alone. You are never just one.

God takes the “one” – the one, weak and helpless and carves out – hews out of that dry, dead quarry many. He does it all the time! He did in it with Abraham and Sarah, He did it in your baptism, and He does it throughout the whole Christian church on earth no matter what the circumstance. This is how He delights to work. That is His good pleasure, to be merciful to you, the “exiled one”, by His almighty power, to His glory and to His glory alone, now and forever. Amen.