

Second Sunday after Epiphany
January 17, 2010

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For Zion's sake I will not keep silence". That's what the prophet says in today's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures from Isaiah. "For Zion's sake I will not keep silence"; you cannot shut me up. I'm gonna be shouting from the rafters, preaching from the rooftops, proclaiming from the mountaintops; I will shake the skies with my voice. I will not draw breath; I will not rest; for the sake of Jerusalem I will not be quieted, not until her vindication blazes forth like the dawn of our salvation, like a burning torch". That's great stuff, right? This passage from the end of Isaiah and I think we often read it as the voice of God, speaking through the prophet addressing God's people, but there's another way of reading this passage which is to understand the prophet addressing God directly, on behalf of God's people reminding God of the promises that God has made to Israel and vowing not to shut up until God brings about the promised deliverance, the new names that have been promised, right? Hephzibah, if you remember your King James; it's not in our translation but the old King James had it Hephzibah, which means "my delight is in her" and Beulah, which means "the married one". Those are the new names that God has promised. It's kinda like promising the kid who is made fun of on the playground, you know the kid who was nick-named Josey Grosse or Smelly-Nellie or Large Marge, in charge of the barge; you know it's like saying to that kid; hey, I'm gonna give you a whole new name and all the shame, all the hurts from the past, right – all of that gets taken away; you get a new name. It's a funny thing, this role that the prophet plays; on the one hand, you bring the voice of God to the people and at the same time, you bring the voice of the people back to God; it's like a two-way street and the prophet stands on this thin, kinda tenuous luminal ground between God and God's people and yet holy ground to be sure, but we know from the lives of the prophets, the Biblical prophets and the prophets in our own day occupying that ground, right -- refusing to shut up about God's promise of justice and righteousness until it has been brought about. That's the kinda stuff to get you killed. This week end we remember the life and work of a particularly important modern day prophet and it's worth taking some time I think to think about the role that the prophet occupies, the ground that he or she is standing on – standing before God on behalf of God's people reminding both parties of what has been promised, what is yearning to break forth, nothing less than the Kingdom of God, the beloved community that Dr. King talked about, the old land being desolate and forsaken given a new name, delight and partnership, wedded bliss, right? God is coming to God's people as a bridegroom to take away all the bad old names, all the shame, the pain that we've been through, take all of that away and replace it with a shining new name, a new identity – Hephzibah and Beulah; I don't see how those names are any better than Josey Grosse or Large Marge. The kids are still gonna call you Beulah the Drooler, right? But that's beside point. The image that we have is of the beloved community, the Kingdom of God and it's a party, right – it's a party -- it's a wedding reception. I was at a wedding last week end that bore a little resemblance to this wedding that's being promised in Isaiah or for that matter to the wedding at Cana of Galilee that Jesus attends in today's Gospel lesson. The wedding that I was

at was in Midland, Michigan, which is the home of Dow chemical and the incredibly polluted Tillabawassee River. I'm gonna try to work that name into the sermon as many times as I can get away with it, so start counting now – Tillabawassee – I love saying it. Michigan in January is freezing cold and my advice to you is that if God comes down and promises to marry you make sure that the wedding does not take place in the middle Michigan in January; it's a terrible time to get married. But there we were on the frozen Tillabawassee celebrating the marriage of my friend Sara, a young Episcopal priest who moved to Michigan after seminary to work as a missionary for young adults in the Diocese of Eastern Michigan and she was pretty well resigned, I think, to a miserable life of loneliness and enforced celibacy in Midland, Michigan of all places; there's not a lot going on in Midland, Michigan and the surprise for Sara was that she met Peter, a thirty-five year old chemist from Manchester who looks and sounds a little bit like a "James Bond villain", but actually has a heart of gold, right -- and I was reminded of my conversations with Sara as she prepared to get ready to move to Michigan when I read this passage from Isaiah because of all intents and purposes Sara's name when she moved was "desolation and forsaken", right? I imagine that it probably felt that way. A young divorced woman stuck in Midland, Michigan yearning to break out and find a real life for herself. And three years later her name had literally been changed, right? Her whole outlook is different, not because she left because she stayed. The landscaped itself was transformed for her; the place that she thought was a prison, the Tillabawassee which like her deathbed became the sight of her marriage although it was still frozen. So I went to Michigan to rejoice with Sara and Peter and it was a joyful occasion, despite the frigid temperatures on the Tillabawassee and we did not run out of wine because the wine that they served was so terrible that nobody wanted to drink it and I'll be honest with you, I really don't like weddings all that well – maybe that makes me a Scrooge, but I have kind of a hard time with the whole cultural behemis that weddings have become and I love the language of our marriage service in the Book of Common Prayer -- I think it's beautiful, but I can't hear it without being so viscerally aware of exactly who is being excluded from this language -- you know "a man shall leave his mother and cling to his wife and they shall become one flesh" – that's beautiful, right? This promise that two people make to each other, the sacrament of God's love, for God's people and even when I can push past my own sense of being left out of all of that husband and wife language, you know pushed to the greater theological truth that's being articulated in that beautiful liturgy – you know push back the pronouns, I still have to deal then with the wedding reception and that's actually why I dislike weddings; it's not the service so much as the receptions and all of the weird requisite jokes about how the secret to making a marriage work is for the husband to learn to say three things – "you're right, I'm sorry and here's my wallet", right? Every single wedding reception it comes up –these jokes and then you've got the embarrassing DJ and all of these weird rituals – the bouquet and the garter, the drunken toasts, all the various ways in which only your family knows how to humiliate you in front of your nearest and dearest and that apparently is the kind of celebration, the excess, the abandonment, the drunkenness that Jesus not only condones, he celebrates; it's the site of his first miracle in John's Gospel, the first Epiphany in this Gospel, the first sign and that's actually what it is, it's a sign, not something magical, you know it's not Jesus the magician waving his arms and doing party tricks, right? It's a sign, a sign of who Jesus is and what he has come to do – to bring about God's reign of peace and justice –

the beloved community – the Kingdom of God. Miracles are meant to tell us something about the way that God works and this one is pretty clear, at least at first glance. The Kingdom of God, Jesus seems to be saying, is like a wedding reception, a big blowout wedding reception where the wine is flowing and your uncle gets up to make an inappropriate toast and the dancing lasts, you know well into the morning which is great as a theological image, right? And less great if like me you don't particularly enjoy wedding receptions. While we were hanging out at Sara's reception watching the Bishop of Eastern Michigan doing the "bunky chicken" on the dance floor, which is an incredible sight, let me tell you. And my friend Megan turned to me and she said "You hate this, don't you?" and I said "Yea, a little bit I kinda hate it." And Megan was thinking ahead to this Sunday's lectionary and she said "How does it feel, Nathan, to hate the Kingdom of God?" She's right, I felt like a total scrooge. And we started playing the time warp from Rocky Moore picture show and Megan drags us all on the dance floor to dance with the Bishop – you haven't lived until you've done a time warp with the Bishop and I tell you I had a good time – right, but I was still ready to go home early. You know if the Kingdom of God is like this could we get a better DJ? Honestly, the Kingdom of God is like that and I realize that my job is not to sit there and stew and think about how much I hate it; my job is to get over myself and join the party. In the Gospel Jesus changes six cisterns of water into six cisterns of really good wine. And the steward is surprised when the good wine shows up late in the party. That's not the way it typically happens. What typically happens is like what my housemate and I used to do in college; we'd buy a couple nice bottles of wine, drink those before the guests arrive and then refill them from the boxes of brandy we had stored in the bedroom, right? That's what usually happens. Usually you serve the good wine first or maybe you don't serve it at all – maybe you keep it for yourself and then everybody's drunk, you bring out the brandy, but not Jesus because the Kingdom of God is not like a bad wedding reception, it's like a wedding reception where the best wine comes out late in the game, at the eleventh hour just when everybody is ready to call it a night and go home. The wine comes not as the expected means of excess, not as a tired old ritual that everybody's expecting, the wine comes as a surprise, it's the punch line at the end of the evening. The miracle doesn't happen when you expect it; that's why it's a miracle. Epiphany doesn't happen when you're looking for it; it comes out of nowhere, that's why it's an Epiphany. And we are caught in the in between, you and I. We're at the bad wedding reception still -- the first part you know which is boring and embarrassing and they're serving the crappie wine and the DJ sucks, right and some of us, the prophets among us who know that things are supposed to be better than this are standing up on the table you know – hey, wait a minute, for the sake of these guests, I'm not gonna shut up until you start serving the good wine, until you start playing music we can actually dance to until the bride shows up – man. At a wedding reception that is usually, typically marked by exclusion, desolation, forsaken, your uncle's embarrassed toast, right? These prophets are making a racket, demanding something better, because we know that there is something better; we know that the Kingdom of God is better than this, there's good wine there and we're over here, we're drinking brandy. There's this huge disparity between the way things are – write the names of desolation, forsaken and the way things could be – should be. The new Kingdom, the new names of delight and wedded bliss, partnership, Beulah land, right – that's where the name comes from and that's how the old hymn goes, you know –

I've reached the land of corn and wine,
And all its riches, freely mine.
Here shines undimmed one blissful day,
But all my nights have passed away.
Oh, Beulah Land, sweet Beulah Land.
As on the highest mount I stand
I look away across the sea
Where mansions are prepared for me
And view the shining glory shore,
My heaven, my home forever more.

That's not just a vision of life beyond death, although it is certainly that as well, but more importantly, and this is what the prophets are always pushing us towards. The vision that Isaiah has, the Epiphany that Jesus brings about at the wedding at Cana, the mountain top that Martin Luther King talks about in his last sermon in Memphis before he was assassinated. That vision of God's Kingdom, of Beulah Land, right, the Promised Land, that not just what we are hoping for, it's what we are working towards. That's the vision that causes us to get up and do something at the bad wedding reception when we'd rather just sit there and snark about how everything sucks, but no, we who follow Jesus Christ, we who come to worship on Sunday morning, we know that there's something better than the brandy that we have been told that we should drink, the bad stuff we've been told we're supposed to like or at least to put up with. We've seen something better. We know what it means to worship the creator of the universe. We've been to the mountain top, right -- we can see it; we can come close to it, we can sing about it; we can reach out our hand and touch it, this Beulah Land. I don't know about you, sometimes I can hear it when I hear that choir singing. We're not helpless here, we know what we're working towards, nothing less than the reconciliation of all people, restoring all people to unity with each other in Christ and not just people, right -- the earth itself -- restoring all of creation to unity with God, bringing about the beloved community where everybody's got a place at the table, a party where the wine is flowing, right? And good wine and there's more than we need, there's abundance there. The night before he died Martin Luther King had this vision of the Promised Land and I take him at his word in that sermon that as he looked out over that congregation in Memphis, he caught a vision of what had been promised. "I've looked over it", he said, "I've looked over the mountain top and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the Promised Land". We know what we're working towards; it's not a mystery; we've caught the vision. The wine's gonna be good when we get there. We will not be able to keep from dancing. Amen