

## The Cosmic Link

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Isaiah 63:7-9 (NRSV)

I will recount the gracious deeds of the LORD,  
the praiseworthy acts of the LORD,  
because of all that the LORD has done for us,  
and the great favor to the house of Israel  
that he has shown them according to his mercy,  
according to the abundance of his steadfast love.

<sup>8</sup> For he said, "Surely they are my people,  
children who will not deal falsely";

and he became their savior

<sup>9</sup> in all their distress.

The lasting value of Christmas is not in the celebration of the birth of a child, — wonderful as it is. Childbirth is common; it happens all around us all the time. Rather, the value of Christmas lies in the nature of that new child, and in what that child—when grown into adulthood—shows the cosmos about the nature of God.

Christmas joy still resonates from this text from Isaiah. It reflects a celebrative mood of the people as they recall the goodness of God. But there's a dissonant chord in the surrounding context—a sour note we pick up in the transitional verses 8 & 9: "*...he became their savior in all their distress.*"

A major theme throughout Isaiah bridges both the distress of Israel and the goodness of God; a theme rooted in the concept of covenant—or promise. It appears often, and the exact application is debated.

Most of us think only of the Covenant with Abraham. This week I was reminded there are at least five covenants in the Bible: covenants with Noah, with Abraham, with Moses, with David, and the Covenant with humanity—the Word become Flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. These are not five new or different covenants. They are restatements of the one covenant between God and God's beloved creation; and, in each re-statement of covenant we see the consistent nature of God.

That transitional verse 8 in today's text from Isaiah is one of the clearest statements of who God is: this God of Covenant—this God of promise. In that verse, the text moves beyond Israel's grateful testimony. We are taken inside God's intention and God's heart. The text is saturated with the vocabulary of covenant faithfulness.

- "gracious deeds" (*hesed*—in the language of the New Testament it is translated, "Charis"—gift, or grace.) Here it refers to specific acts through which God relates and interacts graciously with humanity.
- "praiseworthy acts" (*hallôt*) a synonym for "hesed".
- "great favor" (*tôb*) refers to acts of material blessing—land, food, security, prosperity; but it also refers to friendship, so it also is a close parallel to "hesed."
- "mercy" (*rehem*) refers to specific acts of care; it suggests a mothering love: tenderness and gentleness.

- "steadfast love" (Again, hesed) repeated as a poetic closing of the topic.

This cluster of words communicates the standard for Israel's collective memory. It testifies to God's unqualified, massive, transforming faithfulness to Israel. This is how God is known in Israel: not primarily in God's power, or in God's demands, or in God's perfection, but in God's utter faithfulness.

From the time of Abraham, the Scriptures are filled with testimony to God's intention and desire to be one side of a relationship of mutual trust and love. Isaiah's conclusion, and the conclusion of virtually all the later prophets, is that God's anticipated relationship of trust is betrayed by Israel. It never happens. In establishing the covenant, God has set up God's own self for profound hurt: the hurt of trust betrayed—of covenant broken.

The book of Hosea is a metaphor: Hosea takes a wife who is a harlot. That's her nature. She is unfaithful, but Hosea loves her and continuously goes to bring her back home when she goes after other lovers. Continuously. Brings her back home. He is the one who remains faithful to the marriage covenant. He is the one who suffers the pain of unfaithfulness from one he loves. That metaphor describes the hurt God endures.

All four lectionary texts today remind us forcefully that human sin and the suffering of God are intimately linked. And the Christmas connection is the human manifestation of God's suffering—the Baby we happily adore is the one whose identification with humankind leads to a cross.

Here is the way the covenant is stated to Abraham: *"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup>I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup>I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."* (Genesis 12:1-3)

And Abraham obeyed. He pulled up stakes and moved his family to the area we know as Palestine (or Israel); and, there God said to Abraham, *"To your offspring I will give this land."* (Genesis 12:7)

In succeeding generations, what Israel heard was, *"I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great. ... I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. ... To your offspring I will give this land."* The people and their leaders heard everything except, *"...so that you will be a blessing,"* and *"...in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."*

They thought they were being faithful by building a temple and developing complicated rituals and sacrifices and offerings. But in God's wording of the covenant, their faithfulness would be confirmed, not by correct ritual or liturgy, but by becoming a source of blessing for all the families of the earth.

And so, prophet after prophet, speaking for God, called Israel to covenantal faithfulness:

- *I hate, I despise your festivals,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.*  
<sup>22</sup> *Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,*

*I will not accept them; ...*  
23 *Take away from me the noise of your songs;*  
*I will not listen to the melody of your harps.*  
24 *But let justice roll down like waters,*  
*and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.* (Amos 5:21-24 NRSV)

- *“...if you truly act justly one with another,<sup>6</sup> if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt,<sup>7</sup> then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever.* (Jeremiah 7:5b-7 NRSV)

Over 450 times in the Bible God's people are called to covenant faithfulness: to be a blessing to all peoples of the earth—to act with justice and righteousness (which essentially are identical). 450 times!

And how often did God call for sacrifice and correct liturgy? Jeremiah, speaking for God, says, *“For in the day that I brought your ancestors out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to them or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices.”* 23 *But this command I gave them, “Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk only in the way that I command you, so that it may be well with you.”*

In the letter to the church in Rome, Paul wrote, *“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”* (Romans 12:1 NRSV)

The relationship between God and “all the families of the earth”, is built upon a covenant of mutual trust and love. Christmas is an acknowledgement that God has been faithful to that covenant. Scripture and all of history bears witness that humanity has never been faithful to that covenant.

Like Israel, a liturgically “correct” humanity confuses faithfulness with hanging the right colored paraments and observing “All-Saints Day” and not singing Christmas carols during Advent.

Like Israel, a “spiritual-but-not-religious” humanity confuses faithfulness with being non-judgmental and uncommitted to organized religion.

But faithfulness—and spirituality—in the understanding of Isaiah and others, is related to a covenant in which God will bless a people so they can be a blessing. Covenant faithfulness will be measured by Jesus words: *“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,<sup>36</sup> I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”* (Matthew 25:35-36 (NRSV))