

*Isaiah 62:1 For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
for Jerusalem's sake I will not remain quiet,
till her righteousness shines out like the dawn,
her salvation like a blazing torch.*

*² The nations will see your righteousness,
and all kings your glory;
you will be called by a new name
that the mouth of the LORD will bestow.*

*³ You will be a crown of splendor in the LORD'S hand,
a royal diadem in the hand of your God.*

*⁴ No longer will they call you Deserted,
or name your land Desolate.
But you will be called Hephzibah
[which means, My Delight is in her]
and your land Beulah
[which means, Married];
for the LORD will take delight in you,
and your land will be married.*

*⁵ As a young man marries a maiden,
so will your sons marry you;
as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride,
so will your God rejoice over you.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

WHAT NAME WOULD GOD GIVE YOU?

Expectant parents spend a lot of time picking out names. There are books with thousands of baby names to help them. It is an important decision because, in our culture, the name you get at birth is the name you will have for life. I say, "In our culture" because it isn't that way in all cultures. Imagine this: Your child is born and as one nurse wraps up the newborn and does the Apgar test, another is writing the birth certificate info and asks you, the parent, "What's the name of the child?" And you say, "I don't know. We haven't decided." I wonder what the nurse would say.

I say that because it happened once to me. One morning I was in our one-car garage in Zambia and a worker at the medical mission where we lived came up to me. It was early morning (actually I was a little annoyed because he was there so much earlier than he was supposed to be) and he said, "Pastor, we had a visitor this morning." "Ok," I am thinking, "But why are you standing in my garage at 6am?" Mr. Kafunda, a respectful man kindly spelled it out for me, "What I mean is, My wife gave birth to a baby girl early this morning." I was supposed to know that from the visitor bit. "Congratulations! Are mother and daughter both well? We thank God for their good health." Then he surprised me. "We want you to pick a name for the child." I am thinking, "You're asking me and the baby is already born? Did this just sneak up on you or what?" And he stands there in my garage, waiting for an answer. "Ummm. Can I have a minute?" "Sure, pastor, we won't name the child until she is a month old." Names are funny things in the Bantu culture of southern Africa.

However, the culture with the funny attitude about names might just be ours. I get the impression that ancient Jews would understand southern African naming customs pretty well. In our reading this morning we hear of something that happens somewhat frequently in the Bible: a name change. It's a

name change, not of a person, but of a nation.

I. What the Old Names Meant

Isaiah's message came in a time when Israel's dreams of a religious political kingdom (what we might call a theocracy) were dashed. You see, God's Old Testament people were quite different from our day. Back then, the *nation of Israel* was also supposed to be the *church of God*. They were supposed to be the same thing. (In the New Testament, we have no such mandate from God.)

Because of that arrangement, Israel got rather self-satisfied and spiritually lazy. Israel took its position as God's chosen people for granted. God might discipline them, sure, but he would never let truly terrible things happen to them, would he?

But in the late eighth century BC, in the time of Isaiah, the northern half of Israel was obliterated. It was like God took an eraser to a pencil-drawn map of Israel. Nearly all the people of northern Israel were killed or deported. All that were left were a few scattered survivors, like those dirty little eraser nibs on the paper when you are done erasing. That was the northern kingdom of Israel.

The southern half survived, but only just barely. It was more like a pencil in the automatic sharpener and someone stopped only when the sharpener reached the metal eraser holder, just nubbins. Southern Israel was reduced to a single city. National defeat and humiliation belonged to Israel in Isaiah's time. They felt desolate and deserted. And that is where the names come in. In Isaiah's day Israel was called "The Deserted One" and "Desolate Wasteland" (4). Houses and shops looted. Cities leveled. Crops plundered and the remnants burned. "Desolate Wasteland" is what the neighbors called Israel and Jerusalem. Isaiah was preaching to starving people standing in charred ruins.

His message to them was insult added to injury, "This was not global politics gone bad," he said. "God was behind this turn of events. It was God's judgment on you people for your sins." The name that people called Israel, "**Deserted, Desolate,**" were reminders of God's judgment.

Which is written for us to contemplate. Our sins—what is it that they deserve? I don't think that we often appreciate this, much as Israel did not. We get casual about sin. It can easily happen to me as a pastor, as well. Let me give you an example.

Someone talks to me about how they get upset with another person. (Now no one should think I am betraying anyone's confidence because this topic has come up often over the years, with many people.) He got so upset that he got insulting, perhaps cussing and swearing, and maybe even worse, and it usually ends with, "But they just made me so angry!" Usually when someone talks about losing his temper, he includes a reason. And I listen and I say, "Well I understand. That was a difficult situation," because I do understand, and I too have been frustrated by what other people say and do, and I too have responded with unkind words and worse. And my empathy for that person in that moment prevents me from doing what really needs to be done. What needs to be done is that that behavior needs to be identified as condemning sin. It's not "OK." Even when we fall into sin because of a provocation, our sins deserve God's punishment. This applies to all of God's commands, not just losing our temper.

We can feel frustration with government or others in authority over us, so we don't obey rules and laws that are clearly unreasonable. It's still sin. Sometimes we adopt unloving attitudes toward some people in need, because they have gotten themselves into those places in life and it's their fault, not ours. Being unloving is still sin. People can be tempted to not obey the commandment about sexual purity because of a loveless marriage, or temptations offered by other people. Whatever the circumstances, still sin. We say unkind things to others, but our words were not as bad as what that person said about us. It's still sin. We feel bad about those things, or realize we *should* feel bad about these things. But we always have our explanations and excuses. Then in a nod to our conscience, but not really wanting to come to terms with our sin, we leave it at, "I'll do better next time." That's not repentance.

What happened to Israel in Isaiah's time reminds us that that is not sufficient. Sin doesn't have excuses. No, it isn't that we are basically good people who stumble once in a while, who get pushed

into a corner and have no other way out. We sin often. We choose what we want. We sin in thought, word and deed. Each of us deserves to be **“Deserted”** by God for each and every sin we commit. We deserve nothing better than that God turns us, our lives, our eternity inside out, into a **“Desolate Wasteland”**.

Those names, Deserted and Desolate, did not just apply to an accident of Israel’s history. Those names described Israel’s spiritual status before God as long as they continued in their sins. God *had* deserted them. God *had* turned them desolate. Those names describe each of us by nature: people condemned by God because of our sins.

II. New Names Given by God

But to those laid low by God’s message of condemnation for sin, to those who humbly return to him, not with excuses, but with repentance, he says, **“You will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow.”** (2). A new name.

In the entertainment world people change their names quite often. David Bowie who just passed away, had a different birth name. Originally named David Jones, he changed his name when another Brit by the same name became famous. Can’t have two famous people with the same name; it defeats the purpose of being famous. People change names for a variety of reasons, not always so reasonable. But it is always a name of their choosing, one they like, to create the effect they want.

Israel’s two new names were chosen by God. And those new names were **“Hephzibah”** and **“Beulah.”** Real winners, those names! Just remember, those are Hebrew names, not English names. What’s behind them?

Let me answer with a question. What is the happiest day of life? If someone says their happiest day was the birth of a child, I won’t argue. That is a happy day. Yet at a birth there is a limit to the happiness. Mom is still in bed, exhausted, tired, hurting. And a father and mother know that with the great joy of a new baby comes a lot of future work. Not that any parent begrudges it, it’s just that a child is a great responsibility.

Here is my vote for the happiest day of life: the wedding day. If you are married, I hope that your wedding day was your happiest day. (I realize that the wedding day was not a happy day for all people. For that I am sorry, sincerely.) But if any day should be happy, it should be the day of a wedding. Look at the bride and groom. They look the best they ever will look in their entire lives. On that day, no bride or groom can make a mistake because everyone wants to think well of them, wish them the best, people will make excuses for any little mistake bride and groom might make. Everyone smiles at them, grudges are forgotten. Bride and groom forget all past problems of life. That story is over. All anxieties about the future are left for the future. This is the day fairy tales are made of. This is the end of the story where it says, “...and they lived happily ever after.” All expect the unwritten story of the future to contain nothing but good. So happy is it that the bride rejoices when her name is changed to that of her husband. It is a sign of love, commitment and unity between them both. Life’s happiest day!

Listen to Isaiah’s words for God’s people. **“No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate [Wasteland]. But you will be called Hephzibah [meaning “My delight is in her”] and your land [will be called] Beulah [meaning “Married”]... as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you”** (4-5).

“Your God [will] rejoice over you.” I like that picture. Imagine peeking through the curtains into heaven. There you see him, your God, not sitting on his royal throne like you expect. But you see God getting up, singing, rejoicing, dancing. He is so glad that you have repented, that you are saved, that you have believed that Isaiah says, **“Your God will [rejoice] over you!”** In his celebration, God gives you a new name. What is the name God would give you? “Beulah, Hephzibah.” His new name for you speaks of his feelings about you.

III. We Will Not Be Silent

And so we cannot be silent. Isaiah could not either, **“For Jerusalem’s sake I will not remain**

quiet, till her righteousness shines out like the dawn, her salvation like a blazing torch” (1). The great good news of God’s favor is good news that cannot be hidden. As the birth of a child announced in my garage one early morning, like the announcement of an engagement and future wedding, let us have those foolish smiles on our faces, because we have such great good news that even though we try to keep a straight face, we just can’t. We’re so glad with God’s new names for us!

What is God’s name for you? By nature our names are “Deserted, Desolate.” In Christ, God’s new names for you and me are “My Delight, Happily Married.” Don’t be quiet about it. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if everyone could be called by those same names? Amen.