

Love for the Unlovely

Isaiah 54: 1-10 Luke 1: 26-38

Mark Twain is famously quoted as saying: *Last week I stated this woman was the ugliest woman I had ever seen. I have since been visited by her sister and now wish to withdraw that statement.*

It's the kind of sentiment church hoppers might make. These would be folks who hop from church to church, turned off by one incident, one person, one wrong move, or one wrong something. If you want to find a perfect church, you will be looking for a long time. If you think you found it, it probably won't be that way for long. And don't be surprised if your presence there brings out the ugly.

We expect churches to meet all kinds of spiritual ideals and social standards and lofty aspirations. The notion that we're just a particular collection of God's ugly sinners is never our starting point. However, the true complexion of the place is likely going to be revealed soon enough.

It's well known that a pastor's first year in a church is called "the honeymoon period." During that first year, church folks put on their best behavior as does the pastor, and everyone is remarkably tolerant of faults, errors, and shortcomings. Sometime after the first year, everyone gets normal, which means the veneer of sweet acceptance is swept aside by realities in all their unloveliness. We realize that we aren't nearly as wonderful as we aspired to be. The truth emerges that we're just a collection of sinners dependent on the grace of God, not being saintly righteousness at all.

One pastor was exchanging comments about the unloveliness of the church when an image flashed in his mind. Knowing that the church is called "the bride of Christ," he imagined being at the wedding by the bride and the groom. How would it be if he went up to the groom, the Lord, and said, "You know, your bride sure is ugly." It may be an accurate statement, but it misses entirely how the groom views the bride, whatever it is about that bride makes her chosen.

In fact, God has a habit of picking out the ugly ones as special, as chosen. They aren't always the right picks, and they're often quite surprising given the array of choices. The notables of scripture tend to be the nobodies of history; Noah, Abraham, the rest of the patriarchs, Moses, Joshua, the Judges, Saul, even David, and on through the prophets. It seems symptomatic with these people who are generally an ugly collection of folks who are enraging to the God who is covenanted and committed to them.

The prophet Isaiah, this being Second Isaiah, addresses the people being liberated from Babylon, returned from the exile, all made possible under the first messiah from God, Cyrus the Great of Persia. God's people in chapter 54 are seen as the woe-begotten of the earth.

A “barren woman” is the first depiction of God’s people, reflecting their lack of promise, the hopelessness of their future as a conquered, exploited, and enslaved people. This is the woman on whom God has turned his back, who has been cut off and abandoned. Yet God is the “husband” of this barren woman, and the people of Judah and Israel represent God’s wife.

To this barren woman, the prophet declares, *Burst into song; shout for joy!* She will bear many children in the new times that God is bringing about, even more than the woman who has a husband. What? More than the woman who has a husband? When we run into a strange expression like that, we know we’re dealing with metaphor. The prophet is likely comparing God’s marriage to his wife, to his people, to the marriage of the Babylonians with their gods, something which has proven disastrous for the Babylonians.

There will be so many children that the tents will need to be enlarged, overwhelming the foreign occupiers, and overflowing into the desolate cities of the countryside, undoing the devastation wrought by the Babylonians.

Reassurances reflect what God’s people had experienced in this period of separation from the attention and blessing of their God. The barren woman – God’s people – are told, *Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed; do not be discouraged, for you will not suffer disgrace.* This was the experience of God’s people – fear, shame, discouragement, disgrace. God’s people are a mess, a big, steaming pile of ugly.

God is aware of this ugliness. You will not hear that there was ever any mistake. These people are indeed really ugly, not worthy of God’s **attention** much less God’s **affection** as a husband. What follows is God’s back and forth struggle in dealing with these mixed emotions. *For the Lord has called you, like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, like the wife of a man’s youth when she is cast off, says your God. For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment, I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer.*

Love is like that, sometimes swinging from total disgust and frustration, and then back in utter devotion. We do it with our kids, our parents, our siblings, our closest friends, and it makes us crazy. God has the same emotional trials in dealing with his sinful, arrogant, stupid, ugly people. (That includes us, by the way; God’s people today. Some things don’t change.)

As if to conclude the matter, to answer whether God is going to abandon his people again when they screw up and make him crazy, this passage closes with God saying: *For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you.*

Did you notice in that passage from Second Isaiah an old familiar biblical theme? The “barren woman;” it’s a genuine theme throughout scripture; Sarah and Rebekah

and Rachel and Hannah, and a host of others. As we come to the gospel of Luke, it opens with Zechariah getting an angel visit, being promised that his old wife (and I do mean old) would have a baby, a special child – spoiler alert: John the Baptist. There it is again, that theme, and Elizabeth even says, *In these days, [the Lord] has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.*

But barren old women is kind of quaint at this point. The ante gets upped considerably in today's passage as a young woman, Mary, gets a visit from an angel, too. She is engaged to a fellow named Joe. These are really average young people, Joe and Mary. Until this day, they were total nobodies. Frankly, Zechariah and Elizabeth were virtual nobodies, too. Okay, Zechariah was a temple priest, but nothing noteworthy. Bottom line: God is at work; nobodies get called to serve the Lord.

The bulletin cover is not very Christmasy or Adventy. My apologies. It's meant as a representation of Mary **the day before** Gabriel came to her. Despite the customary (obligatory) pictures of Mary, she is less likely some innocent, doe-eyed, white European princess with hands clasped in pious devotion, looking heavenward. Before Gabriel dropped in, she surely worked, worked hard, living in the hills around Nazareth in Galilee. She may not have been a great beauty, and frankly we have no idea about any religious devotion. We are certain that she was a true nobody living nowhere that anyone would choose to live if there was an option.

There is a toughness and grittiness to Galilee, and we would have a better picture of Mary if we endowed her with some of that toughness and grittiness. Imagine Mary with a tattoo – maybe not – but with a sharp knife tucked handily inside her robe. Mary was more likely a bit unlovely, a bit hards-nosed, maybe even ugly. Our expectation is that God has specially chosen Mary because she is exceptionally worthy and somehow qualified for the job. There is actually no reason to expect this if we look at the characters we find in the Bible. God is so busy surprising people, God never seems to ask for a resume. God is calling nobodies to serve the Kingdom.

When Gabriel appears, Mary probably has the handle of that knife in her palm. That may be why Gabriel does some fast talking, telling Mary, *Don't be afraid.* We may think Mary is afraid of Gabriel; maybe Gabriel is afraid of Mary. Maybe Gabriel was projecting his own uneasiness since Mary is *greatly troubled.*

According to Gabriel, God has chosen Mary to bear a son to be named Jesus (Savior), and *he will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.*

As she takes all of this in, one thing surfaces in her mind really fast. Mary knows about the baby-making procedure, and she has a big question. How's this going to happen? Oh, and did you know I'm engaged by the way? You wouldn't want to tell my fiancé, would you?

Gabriel explains how the Holy Spirit will “overshadow” her. The best understanding of this expression is that it is like at the Transfiguration (Luke 9) when Jesus enters the clouds of the glory of the Lord. The “overshadowing” represents the tangible presence of God in the midst of God’s people. Mary is told that *nothing is impossible with God*.

In the end, Mary declares, *I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said*. She has agreed to be obedient to the purpose that God has called her to accept.

God’s people aren’t any better looking really in the New Testament, or even in the nativity story, if you can set aside all of the preconceived notions we’ve established in our customary and traditional understandings. If we remove the tinsel and gift wrap, the glowing lights and the saccharine songs, God’s people are a mess. God’s people hardly seem worth the effort, given the kinds of failure that God has seen.

But we return again to that love expressed in Second Isaiah, the deep commitment God has to this crazy, sinful, dysfunctional people. There is nothing rational about because there is no imagining that these people are in any way worthy. Nor is there ever any sense that they are going to earn a favorable reputation, or show any less inclination for sinful behavior.

God’s love is for the unlovely. That love may rest on Mary as the one who would be mother to the Messiah, a young woman whose selection makes no sense at all. That love is for the people of God, gathered in their sinful crumminess and messiness, folks whom the world considers a bit of a joke, nothing to be taken too seriously, and mostly irrelevant in the modern age. This is where God loves and where God lives, in the midst of his sinful, ungrateful, annoying, and amazing people.

Our loving God is coming once again to the unlovely, to bring the light of peace and hope. God’s love becomes incarnate, teaching us the love and grace and compassion that we seem so desperately inept at comprehending and embracing. Thank the Lord, God’s love is for the unlovely.