

Monday, March 17th--Isaiah 51:17-23

17 Awake, awake!

Rise up, Jerusalem,
you who have drunk from the hand of the LORD
the cup of his wrath,
you who have drained to its dregs
the goblet that makes people stagger.

18 Among all the children she bore
there was none to guide her;
among all the children she reared
there was none to take her by the hand.

19 These double calamities have come upon you—
who can comfort you?—
ruin and destruction, famine and sword—
who can console you?

20 Your children have fainted;
they lie at every street corner,
like antelope caught in a net.
They are filled with the wrath of the LORD,
with the rebuke of your God.

21 Therefore hear this, you afflicted one,
made drunk, but not with wine.

22 This is what your Sovereign LORD says,
your God, who defends his people:
“See, I have taken out of your hand
the cup that made you stagger;
from that cup, the goblet of my wrath,
you will never drink again.

23 I will put it into the hands of your tormentors,
who said to you,

‘Fall prostrate that we may walk on you.’

And you made your back like the ground,
like a street to be walked on.”

Points of Interest:

The Image of the Day--*the cup of God's wrath*

God has concocted a special brew. It looks and smells a lot like wine, but it bubbles and smokes and has the nastiest kick you can imagine. It's called Wrath. It's not anything you want to mess with. It's meant to teach a lesson to the kidnapers from whom God has had to rescue the captives. God is going to give them a swig of it, and they'll regret ever having caused any trouble.

But in a tragic turn of events right out of the finale of *Hamlet*, Jerusalem takes the drink instead, and it wallops her. She passes out drunk. Even worse, there's no one to help her to bed, because her kids have gotten into the liquor cabinet as well, and they can't walk straight themselves, not to speak of helping Jerusalem. In their drunken state they're so vulnerable that their tormentors are actually able to bully them even further, with their full cooperation: 'I've got an idea: you pretend to be a street, and I'll walk all over you.' And they do. They can't stand up that well anyway.

God comes back on the scene, sees what has happened, takes the half-drunk cup out of Jerusalem's hand, and tries to revive her: 'Wake up, wake up.'

The Promise of the Day--*you'll never drink it again*

Having gone through it once, God promises that things will never go terribly awry like this again. God will safely lock Wrath away where no one can stumble upon it, maybe even get it out of the house altogether--although God still seems to be planning on making sure that the tormentors get their fair share somehow before disposing of it entirely.

Taking it home:

For your six: If you've ever been to one our church's VCO events, I picture God like the volunteer at the snack table who can so easily see that the three year on the other side of the table should not consume her 29th cookie. All the volunteer has to do is move the cookies out of sight until the child finds a healthier, more productive, less-sugar infused activity. Ask that God would be that protective, caring person to your six--helpfully and kindly keeping anything that might harm your six out of sight and out of mind. Ask God to surround your six with people who want the best for them.

Tuesday, March 18th--Isaiah 52:1-6

52 Awake, awake, Zion,
clothe yourself with strength!

Put on your garments of splendor,
Jerusalem, the holy city.

The uncircumcised and defiled
will not enter you again.

2 Shake off your dust;
rise up, sit enthroned, Jerusalem.

Free yourself from the chains on your neck,
Daughter Zion, now a captive.

3 For this is what the LORD says:

“You were sold for nothing,
and without money you will be redeemed.”

4 For this is what the Sovereign LORD says:

“At first my people went down to Egypt to live;
lately, Assyria has oppressed them.

5 “And now what do I have here?” declares the LORD.

“For my people have been taken away for nothing,
and those who rule them mock,”

declares the LORD.

“And all day long
my name is constantly blasphemed.

6 Therefore my people will know my name;

therefore in that day they will know
that it is I who foretold it.

Yes, it is I.”

Points of Interest:

The Image of the Day--*Garments of splendor*

I love the idea of splendor being a clothing fabric:

‘I like your jacket. What’s it made from?’

‘Isn’t it great? It’s 100% splendor.’

Apparently, that’s exactly what Zion has here: clothing woven from only the finest splendor. And

it's the right occasion to wear it. It's time to take off the prison clothes and put on the party clothes. Break out the ball gown. Take the tux out for a spin. Get ready to celebrate.

But when God shows up to take Zion to the big gala, God finds her still dressed in her slave outfit of ashes and chains. The chain is unlocked; she could take it off if she decided to. But there it is, around her neck still. It's time to put the chains away. She's never going to need them again. Splendor garments, though--those, she'll need.

The Theological Term of the Day--Circumcision

You'll recall from previous days that God entered into this blood brother relationship, called a covenant, with Abraham. God went on to offer it to any of Abraham's descendants too. Their sign of acceptance of the offer--kind of like a handshake or a signature, but a little more involved--was circumcision.

The word *uncircumcised* in this passage is paired with *defiled*, which essentially means someone who ignores the requirements of God's covenant with Moses. So, together the two terms give the impression of someone who shows no respect for these blood brother bonds with God.

In a literal way of looking at things, any non-Israelite (i.e. the vast majority of people in the world) would be uncircumcised and defiled, because non-Israelites weren't parties to these original covenants with Abraham and Moses. So, Isaiah could simply be saying that no non-Israelite will ever walk into Jerusalem again. That doesn't seem to jive, though, with what Isaiah has been saying about forming a new Zion out of representatives, not just from Israel, but from from all the other nations, too--a salvation that reaches the ends of the earth.

There was some distinction--especially among Isaiah's fellow prophets, Ezekiel and Jeremiah, but even going back to Moses himself--between the physical act of circumcision and the spiritual attitude to go with it. They recognized that you could be physically circumcised but not spiritually, and possibly vice versa as well. Isaiah could be thinking here in terms of this idea of circumcision of the heart: Jerusalem will no longer be trampled by people, regardless of ethnicity, whose hearts aren't into their relationship with God.

I think there's a good chance, though, that Isaiah isn't being so theologically sophisticated. 'Uncircumcised' was a colloquial way for an Israelite to call someone uncouth or ignorant. It would be more or less like us calling someone a 'barbarian' or asking, 'Were you raised in a barn?' To a modern ear, calling someone 'uncircumcised' is a pretty racist way of saying it, but I guess even prophets are, to an extent, creatures of their time and culture. In that way of looking at things, Isaiah is saying to Zion, 'Those guys were no good for you anyway. From now on, you'll only have to deal with people who see you for who you are and show you the proper respect.'

Ancient Near Eastern History Note of the Day--Egypt and Assyria

I've mentioned all of this before, but it might be worth doing another recap of Israel's historical oppressors:

- *Egypt* is where the early Israelites were held as slave labor; God rescued them from there during the time of Moses in what is known as the exodus;
- *Assyria* is the empire that destroyed the nation of Israel during Isaiah's lifetime;

- And when God asks, ‘And now what?’ it’s in reference to the *Babylonians*, who conquer Isaiah’s own nation Judah, the other Israelite nation, and take the residents of its capital Jerusalem captive. Historically speaking, this doesn’t happen until 200 years after Isaiah lives, but Isaiah has already predicted both the Babylonian exile and the return from it in earlier chapters.

God’s people’s people have had, up until now, a hard time staying out of trouble. It seems like whenever God turns around, there’s a new calamity to rescue them from.

The Big Idea of the Day--*God’s reputation*

At a certain point, you could forgive God for deciding that Zion is unrescuable. It seems like Zion’s resting state is as a captive somewhere or another. So why should God bother continuing to try to set her free? Other passages we’ve read mention God’s deep and enduring love; God can’t give up on Zion because she’s tattooed on God’s hand. Here, we see a different motivation: God hates losing. God can’t stand Babylon’s trash talk, and doesn’t ever want anyone to think that God didn’t rescue Zion from Babylon because God couldn’t. God will be known as the best rescuer out there, no matter what it takes. God wants any potential captors to know without a doubt that God will hunt them down, and any potential prisoners to know that God will save them. If that takes rescuing Zion again, and again, that’s what God will do.

Taking it Home:

For you: How do you feel about....yourself? It’s kind of a funny question, right? Maybe it’s something you never think about, or maybe you think about it all the time. Today spend some moments with God on this topic. Ask God what he thinks of you. Are there ways where you feel like Zion when God says, ‘Hey, why are you still dressing like a slave? I see you as one fit for splendor’? Tell God you want to act (and dress) in the way God sees you. And for however corny it might sound, take a few moments throughout your day to think “I’m clothed in S-P-L-E-N-D-O-R”. See how you feel.

Wednesday, March 19th--Isaiah 52:7-12

7 How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of those who bring good news,
who proclaim peace,
who bring good tidings,
who proclaim salvation,
who say to Zion,
“Your God reigns!”

8 Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices;
together they shout for joy.

When the LORD returns to Zion,
they will see it with their own eyes.

9 Burst into songs of joy together,
you ruins of Jerusalem,
for the LORD has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.

10 The LORD will lay bare his holy arm
in the sight of all the nations,
and all the ends of the earth will see
the salvation of our God.

11 Depart, depart, go out from there!
Touch no unclean thing!
Come out from it and be pure,
you who carry the articles of the LORD's house.

12 But you will not leave in haste
or go in flight;
for the LORD will go before you,
the God of Israel will be your rear guard.

Points of Interest:

The Image of the Day--*Bearers of good news*

The citizens of Zion are anxious for news of God: Is God alive? Will God help? Their fate depends on it. So they put watchmen up on the walls, and tell them to keep a sharp eye out for any messengers. A messenger comes into view, cresting a hill on the edge of the watchmen's sight. They don't even wait to hear the message before they start cheering; they can tell from the spring in the messenger's step that the messenger is bringing good news. That bouncing step feels like the best thing the watchmen have ever seen.

The Red Sea Reference of the Day--*God will go before you and be your rear guard*

Customarily, someone can only be in the front or the back of a line. But God wants to be both. God is out ahead, guiding them . . . and staying behind, covering their backs. They're both well-led and well-protected, with no fear of getting lost or of getting attacked; there's absolutely nothing to worry about on this journey. God has it all taken care of.

Isaiah borrows this picture of God as both forefront and rearguard from his favorite moment in

Israelite history: the crossing of the Red Sea. During the Israelites' escape from Egypt (and for 40 years after, as they wandered in the desert) God's presence traveled at the head of the Israelite column, in the form of a pillar of flame and smoke. At the key moment of the crossing of the Sea, though, God swung around to the back, to fend off the Egyptian army and give the Israelites time to cross.

I wonder if Isaiah imagines God similarly bouncing back and forth according to need here, or if there have been improvements, with two pillars of flame and smoke--one for the front and one for the back-- this time.

The Question of the Day--*What's the setting of this passage?*

At the beginning of the passage, we very much seem to be on the walls of Jerusalem with the watchmen. Apparently, the city is in some danger of being besieged. It's unclear whether it's a flashback to before the Babylonian attack or this is some new threat. The gist of the passage is that the city is safe; God is coming and will force the siege to be lifted.

Then, all of a sudden in verse 11, we're in Babylon with the captives, and God is telling them that they've been rescued and are free to go.

Are we in Jerusalem, Babylon, or both?

Are the walls from scene one actually the walls of Babylon, not Jerusalem? Maybe they're watching for God to come and rescue them from their captivity? Or maybe I misunderstood the message in scene 1; maybe they are safely in Jerusalem in scene 1, and the happy news is that God is joining them. It is not the whole people, but specifically the carriers of the articles of the Lord, who are told to leave Babylon in scene 2. The 'articles of the Lord' would be the furniture and equipment from the temple in Jerusalem, which was indeed taken to Babylon during Jerusalem's exile. So, maybe this passage is all about God, who has been temporarily staying in Babylon, moving back to Jerusalem.

All of these options, though, strike me as too focused on the historical Babylonian exile. That's what God called 'too small a thing' in 49:6. Aren't we supposed to be aiming at a salvation that encompasses the entire world? And, indeed, in v. 10, 'all the ends of the earth' (by the way, how many ends does the earth have?) are watching and celebrating. It doesn't seem like it can only be the Babylonian exile Isaiah has in mind here. Here's an idea out of left field: maybe it's the Babylonians who are being rescued from Babylon. Even the former prison guards are being invited to leave the prison and join this new city and family that God is building. And as long as they're heading from Babylon to Jerusalem, maybe they could bring God's furniture with them.

If it's the Babylonians carrying the temple articles back to Jerusalem, that would be a really big deal. According to the rules set down by Moses, these things couldn't be handled by just anyone. Even among the Israelites, only members of one of the 12 tribes, the hereditary priests known as the Levites, could touch them. But now, if there's anything to my crazy theory, people Isaiah might call 'uncircumcised and defiled'--to borrow a phrase from yesterday--are being invited to join this very exclusive priesthood.

Taking it Home:

For your six: You know what I love more than anything? Good news! It's encouraging, and often unexpected and there are few things that beat it. Agree? Ask God to give your six good news today that will encourage them and give them hope.

Thursday, March 20th--Isaiah 52:13-53:5

13 See, my servant will act wisely;

he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.

14 Just as there were many who were appalled at him—

his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being
and his form marred beyond human likeness—

15 so he will sprinkle many nations,

and kings will shut their mouths because of him.

For what they were not told, they will see,

and what they have not heard, they will understand.

53 Who has believed our message

and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

2 He grew up before him like a tender shoot,

and like a root out of dry ground.

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,

nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

3 He was despised and rejected by mankind,

a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.

Like one from whom people hide their faces

he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

4 Surely he took up our pain

and bore our suffering,

yet we considered him punished by God,

stricken by him, and afflicted.

5 But he was pierced for our transgressions,

he was crushed for our iniquities;

the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

Points of Interest:

The Subject of the Day--*The Servant*

After spending several days with our attention on Zion, we return now to the subject of the mysterious Servant. In today's passage and tomorrow's, we delve deeper into who this Servant is and what he does. In reading this passage, I'm reminded of the idea of the polished arrow from 49:2. It's here where we see just how unique this Servant is, how extraordinary the target at which God aims him, and how impressively Isaiah's vision and words describe it.

The Foreshadowing of the Day--*He will be highly exalted*

Isaiah tells us right away that the story ends well for the Servant. I would say that Isaiah ruins the surprise, but in this case leaking the ending only serves to enhance the intrigue, because once we start to read what happens, we can't help but ask, 'How could this possibly end well?'

The Image of the Day--*The tender shoot*

When God first notices the Servant, he is like a plant just barely poking out of the soil. To anyone else's eyes, he is small, vulnerable, ordinary, unimpressive, even disdained. And yet God says, 'Aha! Here he is. The one I've been looking for.' God looks at this young and fragile life and sees the bulging biceps of God's Arm. Does God just see the Servant's potential before anyone else, or is there something about the Servant's vulnerability and unremarkability that make him the ideal candidate to take on the tasks that require the most of God's strength?

The Curious Phrase of the Day--*He will sprinkle many nations*

People don't quite know what to do with this phrase. How is 'sprinkle' a suitable contrast to 'appall'? Sprinkle with what? Apparently, there's even some question as to whether 'sprinkle' is the proper translation at all. That's usually what this word means, but it's used in a grammatically uncharacteristic way here: usually it would be paired with the substance being sprinkled (e.g. 'He will sprinkle glitter.') rather than the object on which the sprinkles fall (J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, IVP, 1993). Because of all of this confusion, some translators suggest that it should read, 'startle' instead. The only problem with that is that there's no particular reason to translate the Hebrew word that way, except that it seems like it would make more sense than the word actually used.

I wonder if, like I suggested about 49:8, Isaiah is grasping for words here. Isaiah seems to be at the very edge of his imagination. He's seeing something strange and extraordinary, and doesn't quite have the words to express it to us. Whenever he tries to describe exactly what the Servant accomplishes, in a loss for words he ends up employing these somewhat inscrutable phrases.

The Misunderstanding of the Day--*God must really hate him*

Many, many terrible things happen to the Servant, so many that people say, 'That's just not

normal.' Their best guess is that the Servant is cursed. That much misfortune can't happen to someone unless God really has it out for them. What could the Servant have done that God hates him so much?

The thing is it's not the Servant's own misfortune he's experiencing, it's everyone else's. If the Servant sees someone in trouble, he says, 'Let me fix it for you.' If anyone has a problem, he says, 'I can solve it.' If anyone owes a fine or has gotten in debt, he says, 'Let me pay it.' If anyone is sentenced to prison, he says, 'I'll serve your term.' If anyone is burdened, he says, 'I'll carry it.' If anyone messes up a relationship, he says, 'I can make it right for you.'

The one who looks like a tender shoot that will be trampled by the first boot that steps on it keeps picking up other people's heavy burdens, until soon he's carrying them all. It frees us, but eventually crushes him.

Taking it Home:

For you: This passage points out that, even without knowing we're doing it, we get ourselves into situations too big for us to bear on our own. Thankfully, God is eager to lend us the help of God's Servant. What do you need God's help with today? Isaiah gives me the impression that God is ready and eager to be of assistance.

Friday, March 21st--Isaiah 53:6-12

6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

7 He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
Yet who of his generation protested?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was punished.

9 He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,
though he had done no violence,

nor was any deceit in his mouth.

10 Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,

and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin,

he will see his offspring and prolong his days,

and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.

11 After he has suffered,

he will see the light of life and be satisfied;

by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many,

and he will bear their iniquities.

12 Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,

and he will divide the spoils with the strong,

because he poured out his life unto death,

and was numbered with the transgressors.

For he bore the sin of many,

and made intercession for the transgressors.

Points of Interest:

The Theological Term of the Day--*Sin*

God says of the Jerusalemites' exile in Babylon, 'That's too small a problem for me to aim at.' Just bringing them back to Jerusalem would be treating the symptom, not the disease. God wants to address the root of the problem, and for everyone, not just for Israel. Here we finally get to the bottom of it. The trouble God wants to save everyone from is, in the language of this passage, 'iniquities' and 'transgressions.' The more general theological term is *sin*.

What is sin, and why would God think it's the thing to focus all of God's efforts on?

This passage answers those questions with a picture. Sin is a tendency to wander. We're like sheep, constantly veering off, wandering away from the safety of the herd, away from the protection and guidance of the shepherd, away from the good pasture the shepherd has led us to. When we wander, we get lost, we starve, we find ourselves vulnerable to predators. Sin is insisting we know the way, when we don't really. It always ends up with trouble.

God figures that if our wandering problem can be solved, it will mean less danger for us, and less need for us to be rescued.

The Image of the Day--*like a lamb to the slaughter*

The Servant is the exact opposite of all of us wandering sheep. We're being led toward rich pasture, but refuse to follow. He's being led toward what looks an awful lot like the shearer or

even the butcher, but he goes without question. To a shocking degree, the Servant trusts God's leadership over his own eyes.

The Curious Phrase of the Day--*A grave with the rich*

I'm sure you've noticed the ways in which yesterday's and today's passage evoke Jesus' crucifixion. This is one of the key passages the writers of the New Testament turned to in order to understand what Jesus' death accomplished and how. The primary example of this is the book of Revelation, in which Jesus is primarily pictured as a lamb, slain but living.

The little detail that blows my mind, because of the way it so specifically connects Isaiah's Servant with Jesus who lives 700 years later, is this phrase about sharing a grave with a rich man. As I mentioned on our first day, Hebrew poetry works by parallelism; so when Isaiah says, 'assigned a grave with the wicked,' we would expect the next line to be something like, 'and a tomb with evildoers.' Instead, we get 'and with the rich.' It goes from being poetic repetition to a sort of checklist: the Servant's death involves the company of both the wicked and the rich. Even more remarkably, apparently in Hebrew the wicked are plural but the rich is singular. This matches Jesus' story in the gospels: Jesus died side-by-side with two criminals, and then was buried in the tomb of a rich man.

The Plot Twist of the Day--*He will see the light of life*

We talked in 50:10-11 about God's almost impossible advice that we keep the lights off and walk in the dark. God warns that, despite what our gut tells us, if we turn on a torch, we awaken a nightmare, but if we keep the lights off and trust God to guide us, we'll be safe and sound. All the rest of us are almost incurable light-switchers, but the Servant takes God's words to heart. Things get very dark indeed; God guides him straight into death. But to our surprise that's not the end, they come back out the other side, where there is light, and satisfaction, and plenty, and glory.

Taking it Home:

For our church: If one sheep can wander and easily bumble into thistles and thorns and God knows what else, what trouble could a whole wandering herd get into? Could they all wander off together? Over a cliff? I know that we mostly think of ourselves in individual relationship with God, and if we do happen to think about this this called sin, it's most likely just about our own (OR of course the sin of that mean person who you're confident has sinned against you). But it's worth thinking a little about the kind of wandering our whole herd might do. Ask God to be a good shepherd over our church, keeping us together and protecting us from ways where we collectively tend to wander. Ask God to forgive our church for the ways and times that we act more like forgetful sheep than his close, trusted friends. Ask God for our church to be a place of healing for those who have been hurt or wounded by the wandering sheep tendencies of past churches they've been a part of as well.

Saturday, March 22nd--Isaiah 54:1-8

54 "Sing, barren woman,

you who never bore a child;
burst into song, shout for joy,
you who were never in labor;
because more are the children of the desolate woman
than of her who has a husband,”
says the LORD.

2 “Enlarge the place of your tent,
stretch your tent curtains wide,
do not hold back;
lengthen your cords,
strengthen your stakes.

3 For you will spread out to the right and to the left;
your descendants will dispossess nations
and settle in their desolate cities.”

4 “Do not be afraid; you will not be put to shame.
Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated.
You will forget the shame of your youth
and remember no more the reproach of your widowhood.

5 For your Maker is your husband—
the LORD Almighty is his name—
the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer;
he is called the God of all the earth.

6 The LORD will call you back
as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit—
a wife who married young,
only to be rejected,” says your God.

7 “For a brief moment I abandoned you,
but with deep compassion I will bring you back.

8 In a surge of anger
I hid my face from you for a moment,

but with everlasting kindness

I will have compassion on you,”

says the LORD your Redeemer.

Points of Interest:

The Character of the Day--*The husbandless wife*

We have something of a reprise of chapter 49's childless mother, but here the attention is more on her lack of husband than her lack of children. The passage is strangely undecided on what brings about the woman's single status. At various points, she's described as a widow, an abandoned woman, and--if I'm reading between the lines correctly--a wife who cheated on her husband. Whatever happens, it happens quickly; it's like she goes straight from wedding dress to funeral clothes. She never has the chance to enjoy being married before she finds herself alone. It also seems that, regardless of who left whom and why, a cloud of suspicion hangs over our widow/divorcee. Even more than the loneliness, the lasting effect of this tragically short marriage is humiliation. 'Why can't she keep a man?' her neighbors whisper behind her back.

The Image of the Day--*An overstretched tent*

Once again, like in chapter 49, we have a sudden turnaround, from utter desolation to overabundance. God marries (or re-marries) her, and before we know it the husbandless wife goes from abandoned to the center of a vibrant household. Just like she didn't have the opportunity to prepare for the loss of her husband, she doesn't have the chance to prepare for this dramatic expansion of her family. There's no time to buy a new tent; she'll just have to stretch the old one to its limits. Someone is going to have to sleep on the couch for the time being, until we can find enough proper beds.

The fullness of this new marriage completely overshadows the shame and sadness of the first one. Before she knows it, the old days of desertion are like a blip on the screen or a bad dream.

God's Name of the Day--*God of all the earth*

Formally no longer just the God of Israel anymore, God calls himself 'God of all the earth' instead. Is this God's married name? And does this mean that the bride this time is the whole world, and not only Zion?

The Big Idea of the Day--*Everlasting kindness*

God can be angry, and God can be kind, but not in equal portions. God has a vastly greater appetite for kindness than anger. After just a flash, God's entire store of anger is used up. But God never runs out of kindness. It keeps going and going and going.

Taking it Home:

For our city: Ask God that our city would experience and embody his everlasting kindness. While it's normally the Midwest that wins the kindness-cake, ask God for our city to be characterized by kindness, that we would see those around us with compassion and an unending source of

goodwill. Specifically, ask for everlasting road-and-transportation-kindness; sharing the road with bikes, or cars, or those crazy pedestrians, not to mention the snow is not something we seem to excel at--nor is sharing a crowded bus or train car. Ask God for a miraculously benevolent commuting system for our city.

Sunday, March 23rd--Isaiah 54:9-17

9 “To me this is like the days of Noah,

when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth.

So now I have sworn not to be angry with you,

never to rebuke you again.

10 Though the mountains be shaken

and the hills be removed,

yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken

nor my covenant of peace be removed,”

says the LORD, who has compassion on you.

11 “Afflicted city, lashed by storms and not comforted,

I will rebuild you with stones of turquoise,

your foundations with lapis lazuli.

12 I will make your battlements of rubies,

your gates of sparkling jewels,

and all your walls of precious stones.

13 All your children will be taught by the LORD,

and great will be their peace.

14 In righteousness you will be established:

Tyranny will be far from you;

you will have nothing to fear.

Terror will be far removed;

it will not come near you.

15 If anyone does attack you, it will not be my doing;

whoever attacks you will surrender to you.

16 “See, it is I who created the blacksmith

who fans the coals into flame

and forges a weapon fit for its work.

And it is I who have created the destroyer to wreak havoc;

17 no weapon forged against you will prevail,

and you will refute every tongue that accuses you.

This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD,

and this is their vindication from me,”

declares the LORD.

Points of Interest:

The Famous Bible Figure of the Day--Noah

When God starts a sentence with, ‘This reminds me of the days of Noah ...’ it can go a few directions, not all of them good. You’re probably familiar with Noah’s story. It’s during Noah’s lifetime when God decides that things have gotten so nasty in the world that it would be a mercy just to end it. God drowns the world and everyone in it, with the exception of Noah, who gets a warning and builds a boat for himself and his family. Perhaps needless to say, surviving a cataclysmic flood and watching everyone else he knows die in it causes Noah some trauma. Whenever it rains, he wonders, ‘Is it happening again?’ Seeing the effect it has on Noah, God seems to have second thoughts about the wash-it-all-away-and-start-again approach to the world’s problems, and promises Noah never to flood the world again.

That’s what reminds God of Noah here. Apparently, God has had some kind of outburst of anger, a particularly destructive one, that calls again for the promise, ‘Don’t worry. I’ll never do that one again.’

It’s a little fuzzy to me what the occasion for the anger is. We seem to be continuing from the abandoned bride of yesterday’s passage. The symbolism of yesterday’s metaphor was more or less clear, but who the estranged wife stands for was not. Today hasn’t made it clearer.

I want to say that the wife is the whole world, and that God is swearing off all kinds of anger altogether. But I’m not sure that will completely stand up as we continue on our way. Maybe the bride is the Servant, and God is saying that the Servant will never have to undergo the bearing of everyone’s burdens, death, and re-entry into life again. Once is enough.

The Image of the Day--Walls of precious stones

A city’s walls had a very utilitarian purpose: to keep enemies out. You build walls that can withstand a battering ram, and you use stones that you won’t mind being gouged by spears and arrows. This city won’t ever have to worry about any enemies again, though. So instead of being large and imposing and rugged, these walls can look pretty. They are purely decorative. So, go ahead and

build them with gems.

God's Job of the Day--Schoolteacher

Talk about a great school system! God takes the task of educating the city's children in God's own hands. As they say, the children are our future. I think God wants to make sure that there is no generational drift, a sort of telephone charades effect in which the citizens of the city eventually forget about the covenant of perpetual peace God is trying to establish. So, God starts fresh with each new class, teaching them all the ins and outs of living in peace.

Taking it Home:

For you: What's been something in your life that really hasn't gone how you expected it to? How have you dealt with it? Do you feel bitter? Disappointed? Sad? Did you try to forget about it all together? Ask God to rebuild that situation for you. In the same way that God promises to rebuild Israel, and not just with the bare necessities but in the most lavish way possible, ask God to mend that hard situation and restore it to something better than you can imagine.