

## THE SIGHTS AND SOUNDS OF DELIVERANCE

*the Rev. Dr. DeWayne L. Davis*

*January 16, 2022, Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday*

*Lead Minister*

**Text: Isaiah 62:1–5**

This passage from Isaiah is offered in the lectionary as an Epiphany reading, a fitting word for our reflection on God's revealing God's self in our midst. But it is also a fitting lesson for our observance of the Martin Luther King holiday tomorrow. It is a prophecy of deliverance that, in its particular reference to the history of the people of Israel and as a reading for Christians in our modern schedule of biblical readings, has resonance for any time and any place where injustice and oppression subjugates people. It will not do for this prophecy to lie dormant because the words of the prophecy are replete with visual and audible urgency and presentation. It has to be heard and seen for God wants all the world to know God's intention for a people formerly enslaved and oppressed. So this text is both an Epiphany reading and an MLK Day reading.

This passage, Isaiah's oracle of deliverance, shows us in what form the prophetic challenge to the status quo takes and on whose behalf the prophetic mantle is assumed. Speaking through Isaiah, God breaks the silence about oppression, domination, and exploitation of a people long subjugated by the powers that be. As long as the prophet has been pronouncing judgment on both God's people and the nations, as long as the status quo is working for the empire, the status and future of a subject people appeared to be natural, accepted, and unchanging. Throughout generations, the Assyrians, Babylonians, and the Persians defeated, destroyed, and exiled the people of Israel. In the present situation of exile, they have no name, no rights, no humanity worthy of any nation's respect. Throughout the world, they are not known as God's people; they are not known as a good people, or wealthy people, or people with a future. No, they are known by how they have been living in subjugation. Their name is Forsaken. And where they live is known as Desolate.

But the prophecy is that God promises to break God's silence to announce their deliverance. Exile was so profoundly destructive and disorienting that it erased their hope and memory of a liberating God. So this word had to be proclaimed publicly and widely. The prophet wanted it to be ritualistically and ceremonially forecast, using the sights and sounds of those big public events that puts people on notice that something big, something momentous is transpiring. The conferring upon them a new status is likened to a coronation of royalty where everyone will be aware and honor these special people. Wait, wait. It's like a big wedding, where love, commitment, and covenant are celebrated and consecrated before the public as witness and the reconciled/hitched couple becomes a new unit bound in love. God's deliverance is not a private affair nor nonpolitical. It changes the status of those relegated to the margins from what the empire imposed upon them. The oppressed, dominated, and exploited people, who were known as and expected to live always as the Forsaken and the Desolate, will receive new names, new status. This is what deliverance looks and sounds like. It looks like people being affirmed as beloved. It sounds like names indicating their new status.

I must point out that this prophecy of deliverance and vindication is offered before the people experience it. God names it before it happens. So God promises that God will not be silent and God will not rest until

deliverance happens, until all the nations and leaders of the world see God's people, not as Forsaken and Desolate, but as My Delight, as those to whom God is committed in covenant. There will be no doubt among the nations or among the leaders of the world that this people once known as Forsaken and Desolate are now free, beloved, and vindicated by God. Make no mistake, this now free, beloved, vindicated people will upset the prevailing arrangements that world takes for granted.

Isaiah's oracle of deliverance is a word for our own time. We have been blessed by God's gracious desire to make God's self known to us in time and history, incarnating God's self in Jesus and revealing God's self over and over again. During this season of Epiphany, it may be incumbent on us to assume that prophetic mantle, seeking out the sights and sounds of deliverance for a world that's gotten too comfortable with oppression, domination, and exploitation. All over the world, there are arrangements in our politics and economies that saddle countless vulnerable people with the name Forsaken and relegate them to living in places known as Desolate. We can no longer be silent. We should not rest until nations and leaders know that justice and liberation is the promise and gift for all God's children.

When Martin Luther King agreed to lead a bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, he did so during a time when Black Americans, especially in the segregated former Confederate states, were known as Forsaken, living in places called Desolate. When King, the NAACP, CORE (the Congress of Racial Equality), and SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) organized and protested to break the hold of Jim Crow segregation, it was unfathomable for Black people to be viewed as anything other than Forsaken. The prevailing arrangement for Black people was that they were less than; unworthy and unprepared for the privileges and benefits of citizenship; and unwelcome to partake of the abundance of American prosperity. Where Black people lived from the time we were brought in slave ships on to these shores, from slave quarters to the rural backwaters to the urban ghettos to segregated neighborhoods, was known as Desolate.

Martin Luther King, John Lewis, Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, Ella Baker, and countless, nameless unsung activists and citizens would not be silent and would not rest. They would bear witness to the sights and sounds of deliverance in the midst of Forsakenness and Desolation. Through the prophet King, God gave voice to vindication, not just for Black people, but for anybody who was relegated by the nation to the place of Forsakenness and Desolation. And yes, he was hated for it. But he was determined to bear witness to the sights and sounds of deliverance.

We celebrate the "I Have a Dream" refrains of King's speech, but we often don't remember his invoking the sights and sounds of deliverance in the first part of that speech; the prophetic oracle of deliverance in the Constitution that applied to Black people just like everybody else; his recall of the promise of liberty and justice when he said:

When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was the promise that all . . . yes, black . . . as well as white, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The prophet King would go onto the declare that the nation had defaulted on the promissory note to Black people, and he was calling them to make real the promise of deliverance:

Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy; now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice; now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood; now is the time to make justice a reality for all God's children.

In these words are the sounds of deliverance for people assumed to have been forgotten by God . . . but not just in words. The sights of deliverance are seen in the protests and the marches, from the Lincoln

Memorial to the Edmund Pettus Bridge to Ferguson, Missouri, and Minneapolis. God will not be silent and not rest until vindication shines and salvation burns like a torch for all the world to see. Therein lies the call to us.

For far too many people, the visible and loud reality of mass incarceration; racism and poverty; the profiling and killing of unarmed Black people at the hands of law enforcement; and racial disparities in health, education, housing, and employment have erased the hope and memory of a liberating God. Perhaps our call is to live prophetically so the world can see God moving; to see and hear God's promise of justice and liberation and bear witness against the normalcy of oppression, domination, and exploitation; to overcome our silence and put away any rest until the world knows that God has promised deliverance to all; that we can no longer stand for any of God's beloved to be known as Forsaken and relegated to places known as Desolate. God is revealing God's self all around us that God's intent and promise is justice, liberation, and vindication.