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“Egypt, My People”

a sermon on Isaiah 19.16-25

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No one is beyond God’s grace. ... You may think that goes without saying, but it doesn’t. It needs to be said, because God’s grace is shocking. If it only applied to respectable sins, or if it were extended only to relatively nice people with good values, ... well, we would all be happy with that. But of course God knows no such limitations. His grace is larger, and more radical than you have yet realized.

If someone asked you, “What do Christians believe?” Or, “What does your church believe?” Or more intimidating still, “What do you believe?” What would you say? Here’s a simple but powerful answer. Tell them, “Every human being is so broken, that their only hope is God’s grace; and God’s grace comes to us through Jesus.” That’s a mouthful, but it isn’t hard to understand.

One problem is, some people feel they are too far gone. They think they have somehow sinned their way beyond God’s reach. There probably are not many such people. Most people today think they are so wonderful that God should be happy to have them, and just the way they are, no need for transformation. But there are some who become acutely aware of their need, and they feel so unworthy that they fear they are beyond the reach of God’s grace. But they are wrong. No one is ever beyond God’s grace.

Of course another way this works is, some people believe that certain others are beyond the reach of God’s grace. They feel grace should be reserved for the more respectable class of sinners, like themselves. They are wrong too.

Today is World Communion Sunday. It’s the day we celebrate the fact that God’s grace is as big as the whole world. His plan to heal our brokenness started with one man, Abraham, and his wife, Sarah. But it did not stay small. From the beginning, it was a plan to bless the whole world. God dreams big dreams. He sent the Savior, Jesus; and Jesus told his followers to make disciples of all nations. In our day, the Good News has reached around the world. Christians live in every nation. Yes, we are persecuted in many places. Yes, we are sometimes a tiny minority. Yes, much of Europe and North America has abandoned its Christian roots and gone secular. Yes, much work needs to be done in terms of evangelism. Christianity is the largest religion in the world, but only about one person in five is Christian. Nevertheless, we can see how God’s plan has unfolded so far. Today Christians will share the Lord’s Supper all around the

world, in hundreds of languages and thousands of dialects. Rich and poor. Every race. All of us celebrating the grace we have received in Jesus Christ.

Westminster is proof of the wide scope of God's grace. Look at our roots. We have members who are Armenian, members with ancestors from Africa, China, Europe (a strong representation from the British Isles but also Eastern Europe, Germany, France, Scandinavia, and the Mediterranean), the Middle East, and probably more. We have amazing stories about how God brought us to this place, how God brought us and often our ancestors to faith in Christ. We may not even know all of our own story. Some of us know our roots better than others. But all you have to do is look around and consider, how big is God's grace. We are evidence that there is no place God's grace can't reach. No one is beyond his reach.

We have these twin themes – (1) there is no limit to God's grace, geographically or ethnically, and (2) nor is there a limit to God's grace in terms of how nice or wicked a person might be. Both ideas come from our scripture reading. If you are not shocked that this passage is in the Bible, you need to be in Sunday school next Sunday, and don't ever stop going. This prophecy is so daring, so bold, it is almost crazy. I still marvel at it. So what I want to do is this: answer a few key questions about this passage: (1) What's going on here?/What's it saying? (2) Why is it so surprising? (3) Were these prophecies fulfilled? If so, when and by whom? Finally, (4) what does this passage mean to us? I encourage you to listen thoughtfully. This passage is worth your attention. It reveals for us the heart ... and the brilliance of God.

Isaiah the prophet spoke God's Word about 700 years before Christ. Whether this passage goes all the way back to him or not, scholars do not know. It may have been added later by those who followed him, but if so we do not know when or by whom it came to be. It is set in a series of chapters that prophesy judgment and destruction against many of Israel's neighbors and enemies. Isaiah was an equal-opportunity prophet of doom. He prophesied judgment against Israel as well. But in this section of the book, mostly other nations get the brimstone. Also, most of this section is poetry in the original Hebrew. Our text is not. And it makes a dramatic U-turn from all the desolation and destruction. In a series of five predictions, Egypt goes from object of God's wrath to his beloved people. By the end, even Assyria is joining Israel and Egypt as God's chosen heritage. If you know anything about the Old Testament at all, this has to take your breath away.

God loves Egypt?! Where have we seen Egypt before in scripture? In the Exodus. There was that little matter of 400 years of slavery imposed on the Israelites. Moses told Pharaoh, "The Lord says, 'Let my people go!'" And Pharaoh answered, time and time again, "No!" So God brought plagues on Egypt and hardened Pharaoh's heart. Was God making an example of Pharaoh? It sure seems so. Then at the Red Sea, when Pharaoh changed his mind one time too many, God washed away Pharaoh's army. In

the time of Moses, Egypt was the foil for God and his purposes. Egypt was the anti-Israel. They were the enemy God had to subdue to give his people life and freedom. Egypt represented slavery and idolatry. And now this prophecy says what? Egypt is going to join Israel as God's people! It's astonishing.

Even more astonishing is Assyria! The Assyrians built the world's dominant empire in the time of Isaiah. They built it through conquest and brutality. Their army would surround a city and give its inhabitants a choice: surrender, give up its valuables to Assyria, and serve the Assyrians – or fight. If they fought, and they were conquered, which they almost always were eventually, the Assyrians were insanely cruel. I could tell you some of the things they did, but the details are too gruesome for a setting such as this. Suffice it to say, they were the worst of all the ancient cultures in terms of aggression and bloodlust, and those were some barbaric times. They were the Nazis of the ancient world. Everyone hated them.

Jonah hated them. If you remember the story of Jonah, God told him to go to Nineveh, which was the capital of Assyria. Jonah wanted nothing to do with those people. When he finally went, and his preaching met with success, which was rare for an Old Testament prophet, God spared the city. And Jonah got angry with God. Why? Because Jonah knew those people deserved to die. If God gave them justice, he would wipe them off the face of the earth. But God gave them grace.

Assyria destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. The Southern Kingdom of Judah was also conquered in 701 B.C., but Jerusalem did not fall into the hands of the Assyrians. It miraculously withstood the siege, an event scripture attributes to God's intervention. The point is, everyone hated the Assyrians, especially Israel and Judah. Egypt did too, and that's another surprising thing about this passage. Egypt and Assyria were the two big powers at the time. There is a whole history of intrigue here. The kings of Israel and Judah tended to look to Egypt for protection against Assyria, something Isaiah warned against. It failed miserably. The Assyrians beat the Egyptians too. But in this passage, Egypt and Assyria are reconciled and come together with Israel as the people of God.

This is obviously one of those passages that claim God is the one true God of the whole world. Many Old Testament passages declare that all nations will someday acknowledge his rule. But here is something different. The two nations most hated by God's people first experience judgment. Then they repent. Then they cry out to God. Then God embraces them and sends them a Savior. God makes himself known to them. They are thereby reconciled to their enemies and become a blessing to the earth. Here we see God's heart. He could have rejected them. He could have destroyed even the memory of them from the earth. He could have made them slaves of Israel. But instead, he includes them in his covenant. He embraces them as his people. And the passage ends with God applying to Egypt and Assyria terms of endearment reserved

exclusively for Israel in the rest of the Old Testament: "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands."

That is what the passage is saying and why it is surprising. Now, when and where were these prophecies fulfilled? In a strict, technical sense certain details never were. The text speaks of five cities in Egypt so loyal to God they adopt the language of Canaan. It speaks of sacrifices and burnt offerings. There was, in the time between the testaments, a significant Jewish presence in Egypt. There was even a temple to the God of Israel at Elephantine. But this Isaiah text is not talking about a Jewish presence in Egypt. It is talking about Egypt turning to the One True God. Certain details never saw specific fulfillment, but the general thrust of the prediction did. God did embrace Egypt within his covenant. He did send them a Savior. It was Jesus.

Athanasius, that heroic church father and bishop of Alexandria, wrote of this passage: "The thing is happening before our very eyes, here in Egypt; and thereby another prophecy is fulfilled" [from *On the Incarnation*]. He saw the prophecy fulfilled through Jesus and as the gospel became widely accepted in Egypt.

The true significance of this passage extends far beyond Egypt, however. It was fulfilled at Pentecost, when God poured out his Holy Spirit on the believers and they spoke in the tongues of many nations. Isaiah and those who followed in his footsteps realized that God's redeeming love embraces the whole world, even the traditional enemies of his people. They glimpsed the scope of his grace. Jesus made their vision come true by dying for the whole world and rising again as the Savior of all who believe, no matter where they live or where they come from.

And this is the exciting part for us. God's big heart and his wide grace embrace us. We too can be his people. He calls us his people, the work of his hands, his heritage. This isn't about someone else. It is about us. We face judgment. We cry out to the Lord. He has sent us a Savior. He has made us his people. And, like the Egyptians and Assyrians, when we become his people, we are reconciled to one another.

No one is beyond God's grace. Egypt wasn't. Assyria wasn't. The apostle Paul wasn't. This passage reminds me of Paul – the enemy of God's people who became one of them. You are not beyond God's grace. No one is. No matter how good or bad you are, God's grace can redeem you.

This passage claims that God's love is as big as the whole world and more powerful than our sin and hatred. We who gather here today to celebrate our redemption in Christ prove that it is true. Therefore, let us celebrate with great joy the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Let us join our hearts with Christians around the world to enjoy God's grace. This is such Good News. I hope you will not keep it to yourself. The world today needs God's grace. Amen.