

## "The Stopped Up Dam"

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Isaiah 49:8-13

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So....2010 is already here, and we have lived in it for nine days already! The incredible things that happened in 2009 make me wonder what 2010 will contain. Will there be new concerns and challenges...and new "angst"? Probably. Will some of the 2009 concerns and challenges carry over to 2010? Probably. Most likely some of the old concerns and fears will now march alongside some new ones. We do well to recall what Moses said to the Israelites when they, too, had worries and concerns and were camping on one side of the Jordan River waiting to cross over into the Promised Land.

"There is none like God,  
Who rides through the heavens  
to your help, [Who rides]  
majestic through the skies." (*Deut 33:27, NRSV. Adpt.*)

This same assurance given to the ancient Israelites is also given to us. Come what may in 2010, God will be our refuge and strength. We remind ourselves, however, that this does not mean 2010 will be vacant of trials and tribulations. What it does mean is that in the midst of the good and the not-so-good, God remains our refuge; standing with us in all things. (See v. 8 again.)

A story: Once upon a time there was a beautiful lake which has now lost its freshness. The water had once been crystal clear and fresh, enticing animals and people to its shores from near and far. Now, however, no animals came and few people took the time to stand on its shores. The murky water turned people away, and the animals became ill from drinking it. Finally a visitor came by the lake and eventually grasped the problem. Debris collecting from the abundant and hard rains had stopped up the dam on the lake, preventing the free flow of water not *into* the lake but *out of* it. The water grew

stagnant and redolent. (From "All Stirred Up" by Richard W. Patt, CSS Pub.)

Something similar happened to the ancient Hebrews periodically. We have the story of Noah and how the people again disappointed God. There is the story of Abraham and Sarah, when God told them to "just pack your things and go... I will show you later." They did. Yet after a brief time they fell out of trust in God. Then there is Jacob, Abraham and Sarah's grandson (and the son of Isaac). He fell "in" and "out of" trust in God... nearly resisting God more than trusting God. But God is tenacious; loving us so much that He gives the likes of Moses and David new assurances and blessings to remind them that God is faithful and is their refuge. The cycle goes on. God's people agree to be faithful and to let God's blessings flow to them and through them. But then they relapse, letting the debris of life stop up the dam. As we know this is also *our* story.

I do not much care for the phrase "stopped up." I like even less the synonyms: hinder, block, choke, close off; that we too often block or choke the flowing of God's blessings through us to others. (See v. 8b-9 again.)

Today's Isaiah passage is full of "action verbs" (v. 8a): God answers, helps, watches, gives and saves. I wonder what further proof we need that God *was* and *remains* active in our lives and in our world. Yet the human condition is the same everywhere. It is in our DNA. We try to collapse God's Kingdom into our structures, our practices, our ways, our liturgies, our leadership, our buildings, our monuments and icons; but it does not quite work. This may have been precisely what the exiled Jews in Babylon were thinking around the time this was written: "We have no hope, no rescue, no protection, no one to save us." So once again God gives them words of encouragement; words which are for us as well. God says (a) I hear you and I answer, (b) I help you, (c) I am mindful of you, and (d) I give you My salvation. So powerful are these words that the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews repeats them to the Christians,

" [And God said to the people]  
This is the covenant I will make  
with [My people]... I will put My laws

in their minds, and write them on  
their hearts, and I will be their God,  
and they shall be My people...  
I will be merciful toward their iniquities,  
and I will remember their sins no more...  
"...I will *never* leave you or forsake you..."

*(Heb. 9. See also Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Heb 13:5, adpt.)*

God does not treat our struggles as unimportant. God knows them, and He knows they are serious. God knows they were serious in 2009 and they may also be serious in 2010. So God says, "Lift up your eyes... and see" (49:18). This is the same thing God once said to Abraham. Abraham and his nephew, Lot, often clashed. At one point they divided the land God gave them. Lot was quite happy with this. Abraham? Not so much. So God said to Abraham, "Raise your eyes now, and look [up] from the place where you are..." (*Gen. 13:14*)

You see, Abraham, too, had stopped up the dam of God's blessings. Likewise, the ancient Hebrews in exile in Babylon had worried so much that they, too, had stopped up the dam of their faith and permitted their lives to fill with debris. Both times God said, "Raise your eyes... look up... from where you are now..." There came a time in history when God decided to "unstop the dam" permanently. And so we have Bethlehem and the Child in the manger.

Back to that crystal clear lake I spoke of earlier. So what happened? Did the lake remain murky, and the dam stopped up with debris? Well, remember that at one point along came a visitor to the lake who, when he saw it knew what the problem was? With the help of the visitor the people eventually cleared the spillway above the dam of all the debris, and the lake again became clear and fresh. The animals returned to drink of its waters, and people began returning, to stand on its shores on sunny days and starry nights. The point? The flow "in" and "out" of the lake was necessary to keep the water pure!

So... what will 2010 bring? None of us knows, of course. Yet like the visitor who came to the lake knew how to clean it and showed the people what to do, just so the Son of God came into our world to do

exactly the same thing; to remind us of God's love and mercy and to show us how to clear away the debris that may collect in our lives and faith.

God's words through Isaiah still resound in our world today. God is our refuge and strength. God hears, and acts, and saves

"Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;  
break forth, O mountains, into singing!  
For the LORD has comforted His people,  
and will have compassion on his suffering ones." (Isa 49:13)