

**Her Purpose is Proximity**  
(The Story of Israel)  
The Second Sunday after Epiphany  
(From the Old Testament Lesson: *Zech. 8:1-8, 20-23*)

*Thus saith the Lord of hosts; In those days it shall come to pass, that ten men shall take hold out of all languages of the nations, even shall take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you.*

This extraordinary prophecy speaks of a time of purpose and fulfillment for the Jewish people.

It presents a marvelous word-picture: here is a Jewish person, walking along as it were all unknowing, along some city street, when he is suddenly surrounded by a very excited, animated mob, grabbing hold of his clothes. Perhaps his first reflexive reaction would be fear: "What do these people want? Is this the start of another 'pogrom' [defined as: "an organized massacre of a particular ethnic group, in particular that of Jews in Russia or eastern Europe"]?. Or is this a 'citizen's arrest' of some sort?" But no... He looks at their expressions: they are neither angry, nor hateful, but eager and inquiring. As he relaxes a bit, he observes the crowd. They are an amazingly mixed collection of people, like the international visitors you might see in the United Nations building. "Hmm..." he muses, "Maybe they like this new suit I just purchased. If they'd just back off, I'll tell them where I got it." But again, after studying their faces, he concludes that it is not his clothing that is of interest to them. It is... *he, himself*. "Why are they interested in me? Have they heard something about me? Or is it some sort of question they want answered? Do they need directions to somewhere?" He stands there in confused amazement. Surrounded, and physically apprehended, he is unable to move.

*We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you* (vs. 23b). They are clinging to him in desperation. "We cannot possibly let go of you! Please, lead us to your God. We have learned what great things He has done for you. Surely He will do the same for us!" And somewhere, in the very deepest reaches of his heart, their helpless captive knows that in submitting to their request, he is merely fulfilling his ancient calling. More than a duty, it is his... *purpose*, in the most fundamental sense.

*Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine; and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.* (Exodus 19:5, 6a)

The purpose of the Jewish people --the reason for their creation, and the subsequent miracle of their unique calling, beginning with the patriarch Abraham, and culminating with the adoption of the entire nation under Moses-- was their proximity to God. There is no ready explanation for God's choice of the Jews. It is based upon God's mercy and inscrutable will, not upon the merits,

talents and righteousness of the people (see Moses' sober words in Deuteronomy 9). They were appointed. That's all there is to it. Appointed to be His representatives and witnesses (see Isaiah 43:12b; 44:7b). The story of the Bible is largely the account of their fidelity — or infidelity — to this calling. One can well understand the irony and anguish of Tevye's cry to God (from the movie *Fiddler on the Roof*, based upon the historical fiction of the Yiddish writer "Sholom Aleichem"): "We are the 'Chosen People'. But why did You have to choose... *us*?!" The very zenith of the accounts of biblical Israel was its times of renewing its covenant to God after terrible periods of apostasy. How short, it seems, were those seasons of bright sunshine enjoyed in God's presence, and how dreary, long, and miserable were those ages of disobedience and their consequence!

But the worst was yet to come. For when the Messiah of Israel arrived, the King and Deliverer for whom she had long waited, He was rejected, disowned, and even executed by the nation (see John 1:11; 12:37-41; Acts 2:36). For this reason, *the wrath* [of God] *is come upon them to the uttermost* (1 Thessalonians 2:16b). The dread Deuteronomic curses appear to have been realized to the full (see Deuteronomy 28:15-68). Following the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., the heart of Jewish worship, the last two millennia have been the story of a vast and incredible scattering. The history of the dispersed Jews is largely one of persecution and homeless wanderings.

Even so, in the midst of such hardship and suffering, there abound the tokens of God's covenantal commitment to the Jewish people. They have retained their ethnic identity, and managed to preserve many elements of their unique culture. An inexplicable blessing has remained upon them, one that has allowed them to thrive amid even hostile surroundings. They have achieved and aspired way past the reaches of statistical probability. One is again reminded of God's own words:

*Sing, O heavens; and be joyful, O earth; and break forth into singing, O mountains: for the Lord hath comforted his people, and will have mercy upon his afflicted. But Zion said, The Lord hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me. Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee. Behold I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands... (Isaiah 49:13-16b)*

The existence of the Jews has been one of strange contradiction: they have remained under God's covenantal promise, and therefore His blessing, but have lost their proximity to Him, and therefore their purpose. Curiously..., no, marvelously!, their *skirts* have been *taken hold of by men of all languages of the nations* for practically every other purpose under heaven: for music and entertainment and comedy, for culture and art, for learning and philosophy and science, for governmental and judicial leadership, for remarkable entrepreneurship... in short, for every con-

ceivable position of outstanding attainment. They have known both the deepest depths, and the highest heights. But there remains for them yet even a higher appointment.

Let us return again to today's text from the prophet Zechariah:

*Thus saith the Lord of hosts; In those days it shall come to pass, that ten men shall take hold out of all languages of the nations, even shall take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you.*

The Jew in today's text has been seized, neither to do him ill, nor to extract from him anything less than that very highest possession he has to offer: his relationship to God. It's as if the long exile of the Jew from his God --that very saddest of stories that this planet will ever have to offer-- has been ended. And somehow, in the marvel and wonder of that fully restored relationship, the entirety of humanity is brought into the midst to share in the vast blessing that is the consequence. Verse after verse from Zechariah chapter 8 unfold this wonderful scene:

*Thus saith the Lord of hosts; I was jealous for Zion with great jealousy, and I was jealous for her with great fury. Thus saith the Lord; I am returned unto Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem: and Jerusalem shall be called a city of truth... Behold, I will save my people from the east country, and from the west country; and I will bring them, and they shall dwell in the midst of Jerusalem: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God, in truth and in righteousness. (vv. 2, 3, 7, 8)*

St. Paul explains the whole story of God's dealings with the Jewish people, especially as it pertains to the Gospel of Jesus Christ (see Romans chapters 9-11). Through the arrival of Christ, who bore the sins of the world, the entire non-Jewish world has been welcomed into a family relationship with God which once only belonged to the Jews. Alas, their persistent disobedience has indeed brought great consequence, their *casting away*, at least in some measure (see Romans 11, especially). Their absence, as it were, from proximity to God has allowed the inclusion of the non-Jewish peoples who would otherwise have remained hopelessly apart from Him.

But some day, *all Israel shall be saved* (11:26a). On that day when Israel recognizes and acknowledges her Messiah, she will again walk in proximity to God, and thus fulfill her purpose. There can be no higher delight than walking fully within the role for which one was eternally destined, fitted, and created. That search for mission, for identity, for fulfillment, for wholeness, for place, for purpose, that has been the lot of the Jew down through history will be finally, happily resolved.

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*