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## Proper 16 • Isaiah 51:1–6 • August 24, 2014

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This passage is about the end times in which the gospel is not only present (as it is in all such readings) but in which it predominates. Not only does the gospel occupy more space in this reading than is customary, but the overall impression conveyed is a bright and positive one—despite the stark reminder of verse 6 that the heavens and earth will perish and its inhabitants “die in like manner” (“die like gnats” [RSV]; “die like flies” [NIV]). Some reasons for this impression follow.

Twice the text points out the triumph of “righteousness” (v. 5a and v. 6b). The text initiates its discussion of “righteousness” in the opening verse, where it speaks of people “pursuing righteousness.” This may cause us to think of people “hungering and thirsting” for righteousness in the ethical or behavioral sense, of hoping for a world in which evil vanishes and good prevails, of a world in which everything turns out all right at the end. This view finds support immediately following the text, verse 7, which addresses people “who know what is right” and have God’s law in their hearts.

But the “righteousness” the text talks about means more. The RSV translates the word for “righteousness” as “deliverance.” As we know from numerous Bible passages,

we cannot be delivered by ethical or behavioral righteousness; we can be saved only by the righteousness of Christ with which God credits us because of the person and work of his Son. And in most translations the word “righteousness” in verses 5a and 6b is closely paralleled with the word “salvation,” suggesting that the words are synonymous or interchangeable. Thus our text intends the word “righteousness” to have a forensic sense as well. Given that sense, verse 5a has really good news when it says that God’s “righteousness draws near speedily and [God’s] salvation is on the way.” The same is true of verse 6b when it says that God’s “salvation will last forever” and “[God’s] righteousness will never fail.” Heaven and earth will pass away, but God’s “righteousness” and “salvation” will not pass away.

Contributing to the brightness of the text’s presentation is the reaction of people to the imminence and sureness of God’s deliverance. “The islands will look to me and wait in hope for my arm” (v. 5). No wonder the people react so commendably since God encourages them with the tender and intimate epithets “my people” and “my nation” (v. 4; my emphasis). Quite a word, that word “my”!

Add to the above encouragements the assurance of the gospel metaphors in verses 1 and 2, where God compares Abraham to a rock from which his people are cut and to Sarah as a quarry from which his people are hewn. (The metaphor “rock” is applied also to Peter and his stirring confession in today’s gospel reading, Matthew 16:13–20.) The appearance of this metaphor reminds us of the frequent application of the same metaphor to God (and all the comfort and joy appertaining thereto): He is “the rock of our salvation.” At any rate, God had promised Abraham, the “rock,” who was “but one” (v. 2), descendants as numerous as the sand on the seashore and as the stars in the heavens (Gn 22:17), the truth of which is the populous and blessed nation of Israel itself in our text. And in verse 3, God promises further to make Israel’s wilderness and desert places into a garden rivaling the splendors of the original garden of Eden.

Nowhere is it clearer than in this reading that the word “law” in the Old Testament often means “law” in the broad sense, including gospel as well as law in the narrow sense. For the “law” in verse 4, together with God’s “justice” (another biblical term too often narrowly and negatively understood), serves as “a light to the nations.” That’s because it contains and conveys “light,” Jesus Christ, “the Light of the world.”

The only seemingly negative note occurs when verse 6 directs us to “lift up [our] eyes to the heavens” to see them “vanish like smoke” while the earth on which we are standing “will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies.” We might call this a “law look” toward the heavens. But this bad news is more than trumped by the good news that immediately follows: “But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail.” Further, even the word “lift up” which initiates the discouraging look in verse 6, in another well-known passage substitutes a positive look at the same phenomenon, the end times: “When these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh” (Lk 21:28; my emphasis). We might call this a “gospel-look” toward the heavens, a directive thoroughly consistent with the positive tone of this end-time reading from Isaiah.

## Suggested Outline

In the King James version our text, with the addition of verses 7 and 8, is divided into three strophes or sections, each introduced by the refrain “Hearken unto me!”: Strophe I, verses 1–3; Strophe II, verses 4–6; Strophe III, verses 7–8. This arrangement suggested the three-part outline below (although not precisely congruent with the strophe arrangement noted above).

## Three Directives from God Designed for Our Comfort and Salvation

- I. Look back! (See vv. 1–3.)
  - A. At how God blessed you through Abraham and Sarah.
  - B. At how the garden of Eden is the pattern for the blessings God intends to bestow on you.
- II. Look around—now! (See vv. 4–5.)
  - A. God’s law goes out from him. (See note 4 above.)
  - B. God’s justice becomes “a light to the nations.”
  - C. God’s “righteousness draws near speedily.” (See note 1 above.)
  - D. God’s “salvation is on the way.”
  - E. God’s “arm [brings] justice to the nations.”
  - F. “The islands . . . wait in hope for [God’s] arm.”
- III. Look ahead! (See v. 6.)
  - A. True, heaven and earth will pass away.
  - B. But rejoice, for God’s “salvation will last forever,” and his “righteousness will never fail.”