

ISRAEL IS BEAUTIFUL!

Vicar Philip Casmer

I have never been to Israel. In fact, I have never been out of this country, come to think of it. People tell me that Israel is sort of like the American Southwest – my favorite part of the country – so maybe I would like it. It might mean you would like it too – in places it can't be too much different than Montana – arid climate, little rainfall, warm temperatures in the summer, rocky plains, and alpine environments... Again, though, I have never been to Israel. I am going to say however that Israel is Beautiful. How can I know? You may say, "Vicar, you have never looked down from the Golan Heights. You have never stood on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, or floated in the Dead Sea. You haven't ever left America!" True. All true. Yet, here I stand, and I'm not going to budge. Israel is Beautiful. Listen to the words of the prophet Isaiah this morning and see what I mean. (Read Isaiah 49:1-6)

Isaiah writes to the people of Israel, specifically, Judah and Jerusalem. In Isaiah's day there was peace and prosperity. Judah's armies were expanding, their lands were growing, and everyone was comfortable – maybe just comfortable enough to stop listening to their God. And, after a while, there was some distress as well. The Northern ten tribes of Israel were Judah's brothers and sisters and cousins. They were sacked and deported by Assyria and new peoples were dropped in their place. Isaiah had even said to one of Judah's kings, "Everything in your palace...will be carried off to Babylon (39:6)." Judah's future didn't look very bright. Straying away from and not listening to God has consequences. The people had rejected God again and again and now punishment was coming. But the last half of Isaiah's prophecy focuses on God's grace, on the coming Messiah. Prophecy is sort of like looking off into the distance with your binoculars or like my web browser's weather forecast, which pops up every time I open it. It is a window into the future, and Isaiah was showing Israel a comforting landscape of hope in their Savior.

When Isaiah wrote, he spoke about true Israel. In 49:3 God calls the Savior "my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor." The words, "display my splendor," in Hebrew mean, "to be beautified." When Jesus lived on earth, he kept all the law perfectly, and served God and man. In today's gospel, God shows his approval of his Son, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." God was pleased because the Savior glorified or beautified him in the plan of salvation. He is the beautiful spiritual landscape Israel was supposed to be – listening to God, obeying his commands, beautifying Him. Israel came to save the Israelites who didn't want to listen and who strayed away from their God.

Israel is supposed to be beautiful, to beautify God, but the Israelites to whom Isaiah wrote were guilty of ignoring God. He says it right away, "Listen!" They had become comfortable and strayed away. They weren't perfect servants; they were-

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n't even truly Israel spiritually. They didn't want to be landscaped by Israel – changed by their Savior. It's kind of like the online auction service, eBay. Did you know that eBay is host to the growing monster of retail fraud? Just because it's labeled Nike, Armani, or Coach doesn't mean it really is Nike, Armani, or Coach, even if there is a digital picture. Many of the people of Judah were wearing the label "Israel," but were really fraudulent merchandise – they weren't truly spiritual Israel. They turned away so much that the Savior says, "I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing."

You might be tempted to think, "What does Israel's faith fraud have to do with

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APOSTLES
EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN
CHURCH & PRESCHOOL

Apostles
This Week

OUR MISSION

As God's disciples, we the men, women and children of Apostles are united in the preaching, teaching and sharing of God's Word in its truth and purity.

By God's grace, we will nurture believers and joyfully spread the Word of God in our community and throughout the world, all to His glory.

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me?” You aren’t part of the chosen people of Israel. True. And it was the Savior’s job to bring salvation to Israel, but look at verse six. Another translation has a unique way of saying it, “But that’s not a big enough job for my servant— just to recover the tribes of Jacob, merely to round up the strays of Israel. I’m setting you up as a light for the nations so that my salvation becomes global (the Message)!” Israel was just a tiny nation on a globe of nations, just one small sampling of the world’s sinners. In the plan of salvation, the Savior beautifies God by reaching beyond unfaithful Israel to the whole world – to you and me.

But we don’t get this benefit just because at times Israelites of old were spiritual frauds: as though they got their chance and God moved on. We’re just like they were. Our spiritual landscapes often look more like landfills than the high desert hillsides or rim rocks of spiritual Israel. We’re littered with sin. In times of prosperity – Christmas bonuses, New Years – we can listen to the world for direction and purpose. We can easily stray off to try and make our spiritual landscape a physical beauty of money, SUVs, and plasma TV’s, especially at this time of year. And like Israel of old, we have our warfare and strife too. Our faiths can fade or shrink when the Christmas bonus was less than we hoped, or tax-time looms large and the bank account seems so small. We are at war when the thousand voices of family, friends, radio, and TV tug at us to raise our kids this way or find time to do this activity. “Listen to us!” they shout. And we do, sometimes closing out God’s voice in the process. Then we wonder why we are lost and don’t know where to turn for help.

Nor, like Israel, do we always allow Israel, our Savior, to landscape our lives. The New Year is a time of priorities and resolutions, but we can listen to those other voices and make priorities that have nothing to do with the spiritual landscape of Israel. We can go through the motions of worship or muddle through our days as though they weren’t worship and service to God. We might rationalize our sinful landscape, “It’s only (discontent/anger/a little fun).” Like Israel, our trashy landscape can start to match the world’s, so that our neighbors can look over and say, “Hey, those Christians don’t look much different to me.” When these things happen, our spiritual landscapes do everything but beautify God.

We have the horrible power to litter our landscape with the trash of sin, with stubbornness and straying and not listening to our Savior. It’s hard to see beauty under mountains of trash. Sin has trashed our life. But Jesus has the power to wipe our landscape clean and annex us to be the landscape of Israel even though we don’t deserve it.

The wonderful thing about “salvation to the ends of the

earth” is that we get to be included in true Israel as well. The Savior came to gather Israel. That includes Israelites – Jews, but it also includes those who are “children of Abraham” by faith. It includes Gentiles, as verse six says. That means it includes you and me. In God’s plan Israel gathers Israel. Israel landscapes us all to be the landscape of Israel. In other words, the Savior gathers God’s people: that’s his job. In verse two, Israel calls himself the polished arrow of God, or the sharpened arrow of God. I know that some of you hunt game with bow and arrows. I can’t say from experience, but I’m guessing that you have some arrows that are better than others. In fact, you might even have one favorite arrow – one that you know will fly straight and true – the one you would choose for the long shot. That’s your Savior – the perfect arrow for the job – God’s favorite polished arrow. Israel, Jesus, your Savior made payment for sin by living without sin perfectly. He served as Israel in your place – always set his priorities correctly, always listened to God and his Word, always beautified God by his life. He landscaped us – cleaned the trash of sin from our lives. He made us Israel by faith.

Do you believe me yet, that Israel is beautiful? You are

*We wonder why we are lost and
don’t know where to turn for help.*

Israel. You are beautiful examples of God’s love for sinners who don’t deserve it. That’s grace. You can see it when God says in verse six, “I will make” you salvation for all people. God does the action – the bulldozing, the cleanup, the trash removal – we are the result, Israel by faith. Like Christ, we are beautiful because we beautify our God. Not because we do wondrous amazing things, but because we do the wondrous things God enables us to. We beautify our God by listening to him. He asks us to...so let’s do it. Listen to his Word in these pews, or on your couch with your Bible. Listen like Paul and Silas did in our second lesson – in a way that affects your whole life. So that when you go out you share what you heard with the people that you meet.

I know Israel is beautiful; I’m looking at it right now. No, we may not all be amazingly attractive – but we do show the love of God in our lives here at Apostles. You serve on Sundays teaching Sunday School or ushering, serving cookies or comforting a friend, greeting visitors and members with a smile. Serve outside these walls too. Be friendly to those around you because God was friendly to you first – “We love because he first loved us.” Make your New Year’s resolution, the purpose for your New Year obvious and evident – to be a beautiful

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Israelite in service to the one who served you first.

I have not seen Israel, but I know it's beautiful. How do I know? Because I know my Savior – I know God's perfect servant Israel. He was the true Israelite – the fulfillment of God's promise of a Savior from sin. Israel is beautiful because he gives glory to God. I know Israel is beautiful because I have seen you – who are Israelites by faith – following in the footsteps of the true Israelite.

You are beautiful examples of God's love for sinners who don't deserve it.

Philip Casmer is serving as vicar at Apostles Evangelical Lutheran Church in Billings, Montana. For contact information, please visit us at www.apostlesmt.net.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

JONAH- On January 22, join the new Bible Class on Sunday mornings at 9:15 a.m. We will study Old Testament prophecy while examining the struggles and motives of Jonah. Bring a friend and have fun studying with God's people.

NEW EVANGELISM HANDOUTS- The evangelism that the members of Apostles are doing has been a blessing. Individuals have been inviting friends and sharing their faith. To assist us in spreading the message of Jesus, the Evangelism Committee has ordered several tracts to hand out to friends. Please pick them up in the narthex and give them to family and friends.

NEW FLOWER CHART- The new flower charts have been posted in the narthex and are now ready for those who would like to order altar flowers during the coming year. Please reserve your date as soon as possible to secure your choice. Signing the flower calendar constitutes an order for the regular \$18 bouquet to be delivered to the church by Magic City Floral. The flowers are kept in the fridge and used for three Sundays (as marked on the flower calendar). An envelope is placed in your church mailbox for payment to the Ladies' Guild. For any other arrangements or for information, please contact Marlene Hedin, the coordinator. Your cooperation and continued support is appreciated.

FORWARD IN CHRIST- The January issue of Forward in Christ is available in the narthex. Please feel free to take a copy.

GIFTS FOR JESUS- A heartfelt thanks to all for the "Gifts for Jesus" received. A detailed list of items received will be included in our next newsletter. Again, thank you for your generosity.

CALLING ALL LADIES- The choir needs more women or we will be in danger of becoming an Apostles Male Chorus. As the adult choir prepares music for the Epiphany season and the upcoming Lent and Easter seasons, we encourage you to join the choir and sing out praise to God. Rehearsals are on Wednesday evenings beginning at 6:30 p.m.

VOTERS- The January meeting will be held on Sunday, January 15. Please read the agenda and the proposal for the 2006-2007 school year to review what will be discussed.

REVISED CONSTITUTION- The Constitution and Bylaws of Apostles Evangelical Lutheran Church are being updated. There are a few changes that have taken place. The voters will finalize the revisions and ratify it on January 15. Please review the changes or pick up a copy in the back of the church. If you have any questions or concerns, please speak to Casey Besler or Karl Wenz.

COUNCIL MEETING- The council will meet on Monday, January 23.

PRESCHOOL- Open enrollment has begun for the 2006-2007 preschool year. There are limited spaces and members of Apostles will have the first opportunity to enroll their children. In February, the enrollment will be made open to the public. Please speak with Lynette Scott or call the church office at 656-7141.

NEW OUTDOOR PLAY SYSTEM- The blessings of God continue to pour on the ministry that is being done at Apostles. Recently a memorial was given for Jerry Vetter which will be used as the "seed

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money" toward the purchase of new outdoors equipment for the pre-school. The system will replace all the current playground equipment. Please pray of how you could contribute toward this project. More information will be made available shortly as to how to contribute and what system will be purchased.

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Inside: This Week's Sermon

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