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Seeking God

Isaiah 55:6

One of my favorite World War II era movies is a 1942 William Wyler film called *Mrs. Miniver*. It tells the story of an English village struggling to make it through the terrible early years of the war. The war brings many changes to the daily lives and relationships of all the people within the village. Young men go away to fight while those who are left behind must endure the saturation bombing raids conducted by the Germans. Loss of life and property from these raids affect rich and poor alike.

The impact of change is particularly disorienting for Lady Beldon, an arrogant aristocratic woman played by Dame May Whitty. When her granddaughter falls in love with and marries the son of an architect in the village Lady Beldon is forced to broaden her circle of relationships. She is particularly mystified by Mrs. Miniver, her granddaughter's new mother-in-law. Greer Garson plays this high-spirited woman who is always affirming the ordinary people in the village that Lady Beldon views with contempt. Lady Beldon's gruff exterior begins to crack as she is both attracted to and threatened by Mrs. Miniver and what she represents.

The moment of truth for Lady Beldon comes at the annual flower show which the villagers bravely stage between the air raids. Lady Beldon takes great pride in her roses and for 30 years she has won the annual Beldon Cup challenge for the best rose grown in the village. Most years there is no one in the village who dares to enter this competition against her. But this year the humble and unassuming train station master has entered a very special rose which he has lovingly developed. He has named the new variety of rose for the most respected woman in the village, Mrs. Miniver.

Lady Beldon waits nervously for the judges to render their verdict as Mrs. Miniver gets her to talk about why it is so important to her to win the cup every year. Lady Beldon finally admits that she does not know why winning the cup is so important to her. She simply cannot come to terms with the idea of losing. When the judges hand Lady Beldon the slip of paper confirming that she has won again she is greatly relieved. But then the troublesome Mrs. Miniver suggests that since Lady Beldon is supposed to announce the prize she could reverse the verdict if she believed the judges had made an incorrect decision. As Mrs. Miniver looks her in the eye, Lady Beldon is unnerved. She petulantly replies, "You have such a way of looking at people."

Lady Beldon takes the podium to make the presentation of the cup. Now it is the two roses which are staring at her. Her eyes dart back and forth from one to the other and then she knows what she must do. She tears up the paper with the judges' verdict and announces that the station master has produced the best rose. There before the whole community Lady Beldon becomes a new woman. For the first time in her life she has acted unselfishly for the good of the community. When she hears the thunderous and joyful response of the villagers to her announcement, she knows that the people understand what she has done. She has shown them respect and they love her for it.

This is the kind of repentance that Jesus was describing in the 13th chapter of Luke. The disciples complain to him about an atrocity that Herod has just committed. They are looking to Jesus to respond with righteous indignation. But Jesus' response to this disaster is not the one his followers expect. He reminds them that Herod is not the only one who needs to repent. We all have work to do to establish a right relationship with God and our fellow human beings. Tragic events are a warning sign to remind us of how fragile human life is. Human suffering in any form can be a mirror in which to see the destructive consequences of those choices which ignore the needs of others. It is this call to repentance that informs Jesus' way of looking at the disciples. In his eyes they begin to see themselves as people who go in a new direction to make a positive difference in the broken world around them.

This process is at work in the message of the prophet in Isaiah 55. There the prophet speaks to the condition of a people who have lived for many years in Babylonian exile. They are a hopeless people who have learned to be cynical. They have spent a lifetime cursing their enemies and blaming their circumstances. But the prophet announces that God is turning the page and they need to turn their lives in a new direction. For repentance is not just about turning away from something that is destructive. It is also about turning toward something good.

The prophet calls the people to prepare themselves for the journey home. That means leaving the blame game behind so that they can offer their lives in the service of God. The prophet says, "Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near (Isaiah 55:6)." Repentance means learning to make the worship of God the center of our lives. That is the journey the prophet wants these exiles to make.

Orel Herschiser was a major league pitcher who had an amazing season with the Los Angeles Dodgers in 1998. In August of that season he had a streak of 59 consecutive innings in which he did not allow an earned run. He continued his dominance of hitters in the post season. He finished the season with the Cy Young Award and MVP awards for the National League Playoffs and the World Series.

In one of the World Series games the TV cameras zoomed in on Orel in the dugout between innings. The cameras showed that he was singing softly to himself. Unable to make out the tune, the announcers quipped that his incredible performance certainly gave him something to sing about. When the Series was over Orel appeared on one of the late night television talk shows. The host asked him what song he had been singing in the dugout, but Orel tried to duck the question. His attempt to change the subject didn't work. The host begged and the audience roared for him to sing for them what he had been singing in the dugout during the World Series. Finally Orel gave in. He brushed aside his embarrassed reluctance and began to sing with his untrained voice:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow
Praise Him all creatures here below
Praise Him above ye heavenly host
Praise Father, son, and Holy Ghost.

(Lindsay P. Armstrong, *Journal For Preachers*, Lent, 2010, page 13).

He was singing the Huguenot tune written by John Calvin's friend that we sing every Sunday. Before a national television audience Herschiser was maneuvered into revealing that his life is not centered on himself, but on the worship of God. When we sing the doxology we are turning our lives to the God who calls us to serve.