

It Remains to be Seen -- Lent5C

Last week we talked about homecoming, and some of the many ways to think about why we have such a yearning to go home, what it means to be heading home, and what it feels like to be home again. Here, in the words of Isaiah, we are bidden to absorb and interpret what Walter Brueggeman has called, 'the poetry of homecoming.'

Scholars have determined that the great prophetic text known as Isaiah comprises three main groups of writings; the voice of chapters 40-55 is referred to as "2nd Isaiah," composed while the Israelite leadership was still being forced to reside far from Jerusalem, 'by the rivers of Babylon.' The prophet's central message is that the captive exiles will be set free and the Lord will lead them home. Like the New Testament gospels, this good news is delivered to a people who are not yet free, and as with the gospel audience, Isaiah's listeners are largely skeptical and hesitant in embracing such hope. Isaiah's project was to espouse and proclaim a view of past, present and future radically alternative to that held by many, if not most of his contemporaries. Jesus' project was the same: to insist that something new and wonderful was in store for anyone who chooses peace, love and understanding over the prevailing ethos of struggle, powermongering and suspicion.

As Christians, this project is our project too: not only to bask in the glow of God's wondrous care of us throughout our existence; not only to enjoy and thrive upon the blessed assurance that all manner of things will be well, but to go forth in peace to love and serve the Lord by loving

and serving all of Creation. Our project is to enhance and cultivate the soil in the garden of humanity so that the seeds of hope might germinate, grow and bear fruit. The fruit, the first fruit of such an enterprise is peace.

How does 2nd Isaiah approach this task of delivering such a message? Not all of us today understand the experience of exile, but we have experienced the shadow of past tragedies, whose grief swirls around us and clouds our vision. As Kristin Largen observes, “Sudden deaths, broken relationships, bad decisions, cruelties and frailties of others and our own selves – all these linger about us and hinder our ability to see the future, let alone move into it gracefully.” We each consider ourselves uniquely apart from the common experience, due to our special and extenuating circumstances. The Good News might be something we can conceptualize...maybe. Certainly we can enjoy all the singing and celebrating and glee over the idea of our own salvation from fear, pain and mis-identity. But each of us is subject to lingering suspicions that we’re a special case, that we might have missed the boat somehow, that we are forever alone. These thoughts can imprison and enslave our spirit as thoroughly and debilitatingly as any prison cell. Our self-identification with trouble convinces us that there is no way out of the problem, that all are eligible for salvation and peace, except me. ‘I alone am left’ to observe the scene and comment upon it. It is this very singularity that God, through Isaiah and Jesus, would dispel forever. Such revelation, clarification and education is the essence of humility, and the starting point for love.

Ellen Charry writes: “The story of God in Jesus is not the coming of God to Christians, for to this the history of Israel already eloquently testifies. Rather, in Jesus God comes to us as us, so precious are we to God. To become a disciple of Jesus is the beginning of a new life. To understand leadership as servanthood, to be challenged by the strenuous ethical teachings of Jesus, to grasp hope of eternal life with God regardless of ethnicity, to be humbled as a loved sinner for whose sake God poured himself out and made himself one with us in humiliation and suffering – all this is new. It is not simply a reiteration of something foretold in the history of Israel; it is a new disclosure of God.”

Nowadays, God’s ‘way out of no way’ can be more difficult than ever to comprehend; our buy-in is persistently challenged. In this age of great structures, cantilevered and single-arc-expanded marvels of engineering, vision, economics and technology are capable of carrying us most elegantly over any obstacle, it seems. What we’ve lost is not just time-bound experience of miraculous intervention on God’s part; we have an increasingly tenuous hold on the more lasting, more universal, more powerful effect of the stories in our holy scripture. We so-called ‘Moderns’ think we can’t afford, can’t rely on and don’t need any help in overcoming our obstacles. The truth is that we do; we always have and we always will. Humankind is capable of untold wonders in the realm of technology, but we have made little progress since the Bible days in the realm of spiritual maturity. Technologically, we are in hyperspace; spiritually, we are still falteringly trying to clamber out of the primal ooze.

Asks Michael Williams: “What are those barriers, creations of human ingenuity or features of the natural landscape that stand in the way of our following God’s direction towards freedom? How do we listen to the call of God away from all that enslaves us: prosperity or poverty, success or failure, growth or decline? What could it mean that we try to follow one who will make a path through whatever barriers stand in the way of the people of God?” What will make us feel at home?

And how do we realign ourselves with the one who ordered the universe? How do we get back into the flow of cosmic reality? How do we go back to knowing ourselves as -- altogether briefly -- the brilliant, conflicted, passionate, hungry, instinctive and spiritual denizens of Planet Earth, whose only hope for connectedness and meaning resides in a greater good called God who alone can link us to what came before, what prevails today, and what remains to be seen.

Let Isaac Watts’ sublime poetry be our prayer:
The sure provisions of my God attend me all my days; oh,
may Thy house be my abode and all my work be praise.
There would I find a settled rest, while others go and
come; no more a stranger nor a guest, but like a child at
home.