

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

**Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; John 12:1-8; Philippians 3:4b-14**

**Isaiah 43:16-21** (actually the passage goes through verse 25) deals with breaking away from old structures and old ways of doing things in order to perceive and act in cooperation with what God is presently doing.

This prophecy begins with God's promise, "Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I (God) am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it" (43:16-19a)?

It is extremely difficult for old structures, old systems and the people who maintain them to perceive God moving in new ways. That was an essential problem of the Jewish aristocracy living in Babylonian captivity. They could not perceive God "about to do a new thing". And because they couldn't be open to new ways, they would try to quench the movement of the Spirit and have to end up being quenched themselves.

In Isaiah 43, the author uses two metaphors in order to urge Israel to be receptive to God's movement in their midst and in the world. The first metaphor is that of rescue at the Red Sea (vss. 16-17), the second is that of the Exodus itself (vss. 19-21). The first metaphor is of God's miraculous deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea. Israel seemed trapped between the sea and the advancing Egyptian army. But God acted. God "made a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters" for Israel. And after they had crossed the parted sea to safety in the desert, and the Egyptian army charged into the breach after them, the waters close upon that army so that horses and warriors "lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick".

Second, God led Israel out of the familiarity of Egypt where, even though they were slaves groaning under the harshest of treatment, they at least knew what to expect. He led them out into the wilderness where everything was new and therefore intimidating. But the fact is that God made a way for them in that desert, shaped them in that wilderness into the people he wanted them to be and then brought them into a new land. So God will do the same today, as he leads Israel out of Babylon and will take them through a wilderness without travail back to their Promised Land.

Even though it is not included in today's Old Testament lesson (but is still an integral part of the larger passage), a further metaphor is that of a courtroom. Israel is on trial for doubting God and thus sinning against God (vss. 22-25). They sinned against God by not sacrificing to him and by abandoning him. But despite Israel's guilt, God will forgive them – for by nature, God is a forgiving God. "I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins" (vs. 25).

It is in the nature of God to forgive sins, not to hold sin against the people. He wants to set free the sinner, not keep him in thrall and under judgment. Thus, God forgave Israel when they had sinned with the golden calf (Exod. 34:6-7; cf. Luke 5:21). So the Lord will forgive the doubting

and timid response of Israel to proposed release from Babylon. These, God will forgive! But God will not forgive those who, because of their bondage to the systems and structures that maintain a status quo that destroys people, refuse to perceive what they are doing, avoid being accountable and seek to quench that new work the Spirit would do in their midst.

**Psalm 126** is a communal psalm of thanksgiving that intriguingly examines the relationship between God’s intervention in human affairs and our responsibility for those affairs. This psalm is meant for use at a religious festival, and is divided into two parts. It begins:

“When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, ‘The Lord has done great things for them’. The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced” (Psalm 126:1-3).

On a first reading, this psalm seems to be declaring that God has acted unilaterally to “restore the fortunes of Zion” and so the only appropriate response on the part of the children of Israel as well as other nations that have seen Israel’s growing prosperity is to declare, “The Lord (Yahweh) has done great things for us (them).” On the one hand, that is indeed a true statement. However, the Hebrew has a nuance in it that does not express itself in this translation that throws a different meaning on these two verses. The Hebrew expression, *‘im elleh*, would normally be translated “with them” rather than the NRSV translation, “for them”. That is, the common and preferred meaning of this Hebrew expression would ordinarily be “with them”; it is a rather forced translation to make it “for them”.<sup>1</sup>

So what? Is this not quibbling over a few words? It is quibbling! But it is very important quibbling. If one adopts the more appropriate way of translating the Hebrew under question in verses 2 and 3, this is what would result:

“Then even the nations said, ‘Yahweh showed his greatness by working with them’. Yahweh did show his greatness by working with us; thus we grew happy”!<sup>2</sup>

That is, the traditional translation of this passage, as captured in the NRSV, is that God has acted to do good to the Israelites. The translation that is less twisted is that God and Israel have worked together to bring about the transformation of what would otherwise be a barren wilderness. The Israelites have cooperated with God in the restoration of their country and the building up of their common wealth as a nation.

In other words, this psalm is a reflection of Jubilee at work. If Israel is truly faithful to its Law, then it will be conscientious about acting out the Sabbatical laws of letting the land lie fallow so that it can restore itself, forgiving the debts. If the people periodically free its slaves, and if the nation intentionally redistributes its wealth found in its land, then Israel is working with God for the continual restoration of the nation. Justice will prevail, wealth will be equitably shared, and a

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Dahood, *Psalms III: Psalms 100-150, The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), pp. 217-221.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, translation on p. 217.

truly loving and relational culture will be built. And what will be the result of such cooperative behavior? The people will “grow happy”. And “Yahweh will exhibit his greatness” to both Israel and to all the nations around them!

It is in the light of this shared responsibility of both God and humanity that the Psalmist can then sing, “Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb. May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves” (vss. 4-6).

Because of the Israelites’ responsible action toward their poor and powerless and because of their willingness to share their wealth and power by being obedient to the Jubilee, a miracle will take place among the people, the Psalmist proclaims. Having made the decision to be responsible in their treatment of one another and their shaping of their nation, the people will enter into this reforming process with “fear and trembling”. So they will “sow in tears”, each “bearing his seed pouch” full of seeds, but doing so in fear and trepidation. Will it work, or are they simply being fools with their money? Just wait and see what will happen, the Psalmist tells us! Trust God and do the responsible thing toward the neighbor, and just watch what will happen.

And so the Israelites discover what will happen when they live their national life, trusting in God in the very way they choose to use their money for the good of all in the community and act justly in their political decisions. They “will come home amid shouts of joy, bearing their full sheaves!” God will fully supply when God’s people fully share!

**John 12:1-8**, which tells the story of the anointing of Jesus by Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus, is a different incident than that reported in Luke 7:36-50. This story, told by John, is also told by Matthew (26:6-12) and Mark (14:3-9) in their gospels. But in John, it takes a unique twist because of the incident that immediately precedes it – the story of Jesus’ raising of Lazarus from the dead (John 11:38-44).

The story of Lazarus’ resurrection ends with Israel’s temple priests gathering to worry about what to do. They say to each other, “What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation” (11:47b-48). They knew that Rome would not long tolerate the disruption and threat Jesus’ mobilizing of the people was to both Rome and the Jewish clergy leadership of Israel.

The Israelite high priest, Caiaphas, responded to the pessimism of the other priests by saying, “You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed” (11:49b-50). With this telling response by Israel’s high priest, a plot by the Jewish elite to kill Jesus was set into motion. Thus, the Gospel of John now focuses upon the inevitable and immediate execution of Jesus. John 12:1-8, our Gospel lesson for today, sets the stage by telling of Mary’s preparation of Jesus’ body for burial.

In the Johannine story of this act of anointing, we learn that Jesus is in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Mary takes “a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard” and anoints Jesus’ feet. It is important to emphasize both the intent and the extent of Mary’s grateful anointing. The Greek word translated “wipe” in the phrase, “Mary wiped Jesus’ perfumed feet with her hair” (12:5b) is the Greek *ekmasso*. It is the identical word used later by John to describe Jesus’ wiping of his disciples’ feet in the foot washing event (13:5). That is a very intentional connection made by the author. Just as Jesus’ washing of his disciples’ feet and then his tender wiping of them is Jesus’ act of love toward his disciples, so Mary’s washing with the perfume and wiping with her hair of the feet of Jesus was her extravagant act of love toward Jesus! And the author of the Gospel of John wants us to clearly see Mary’s intention behind that act.

Judas Iscariot protests this intention by centering on its extravagance, noting that the cost of the perfume was equal to one year’s wages of an ordinary laborer. “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” he declared.

But Jesus responds, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me” (12:7-8).

In the face of Judas’ protest, Jesus defends the extravagance of Mary. Judas is really acting like the priestly and Pharisaic systems of Israel, in that his protest is voiced on the acceptable grounds of mercy for the poor while, in reality, it is truly motivated by very ulterior motives. John 12:6 tells us, “He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it”. Judas protests about the perfume being used to anoint Jesus when it could have been used to support the poor. In reality, he wanted to get his own hands on the money and steal it. Likewise, the Jewish political, economic and religious systems protest about Jesus on the religious grounds that he was breaking the Law of Moses. In reality, their real opposition to him was his threat to their dominance of Israelite society that brought them great wealth and power. Thus, it is here foreshadowed that Judas has already psychologically given himself in service to the systems. There is no real difference between him and them!

Jesus affirms Mary’s generosity. His statement, “She might keep it for the day of my burial” is the first time Jesus actively speaks in the Gospel of John of his rapidly approaching death – for it is only six days away (see vs. 12). What Jesus is centering on is the reality of that approaching death at the hand of both Roman and Jewish systems. Mary, of all of Jesus’ followers, has the spiritual depth and sensitivity to discern that Jesus will have only a very limited time remaining for him to be among them. It is she, through her generosity, who acts in reckless and abandoned love, and thus helps prepare Jesus for his inevitable burial. .

Jesus then says, “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me” (vs. 8). This is, in part, a quotation from Deuteronomy 15:11, one-third of its comprehensive instruction to Israel regarding the poor.<sup>3</sup> Jesus’ use of it is not meant to be – and cannot be used – as a

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<sup>3</sup> 1. “There will be no poor among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you if only you will obey this commandment [i.e., “there will be no poor among you”] that I command you today” (Deut. 15:4-5). 2. “There will never cease to be poor on the earth” (15:11a). 3. “I therefore command you, open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land” (15:11b).

justification for doing nothing about poverty; otherwise, Jesus is being faithless to the remainder of the Deuteronomic commandment. And if Jesus' ministry demonstrated anything, it was his commitment to the poor and hurting of Israel.

What Jesus is actually saying in this passage is, "Your excuse, Judas, for wanting this money by evoking the needs of the poor isn't going to work. I can see right through your transparent words. The reality is there will always be poor people, no matter how we organize society to eliminate poverty. That is simply a fact of life. But you won't always have me! In another six days, I will be dead. So celebrate me and my ministry while you still have time!"

This story is then immediately followed by the fateful words, "When the great crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Judeans were deserting (the priests) and were believing in Jesus" (12:9-11).

Not only was Jesus a threat to the systems, but Lazarus was also becoming a liability. Because he was a living witness that Jesus was indeed "the resurrection and the life" (11:25-26), the chief priests decided that he, too, would have to be killed. The systems were determined to leave no witnesses to Jesus' miraculous power!

**Philippians 3:4b-14** is, like our Gospel and Old Testament lessons for this Sunday, about discerning and acting upon God's moving in new ways, rather than our becoming fixated upon defending old beliefs and old structures. But Paul examines God's breaking out into the new by examining his own life and how God has miraculously moved in him.

"If anyone else has reasons to be confident in the flesh, I have more; circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless" (3:4b-6).

Paul begins by reciting his former credentials as a Jew. And what credentials he had! He, of course, was a Jew. But he was also one whose parents were very zealous about his participation in the Hebrew *cultus*. He was circumcised on the eighth day. He was a member of the tribe of Benjamin. He was "a Hebrew born of Hebrews" (that is, one whose entire genealogy was one of being a part of the household of Israel).

But Paul was more than one who simply grew up in the Hebrew tradition and embraced it himself. He was also one who was fanatical about his personal commitment to and involvement in Judaism. Convictionally, he was a Pharisee, studying the law at the feet of Israel's greatest living rabbi, Gamaliel (3:5b; Acts 22:3). As a result of that study, he was thoroughly indoctrinated in and unquestioningly embraced that Law. As a true devotee of the Law, Paul persecuted the church of Jesus Christ because the Christians were perceived as such a threat to the Law. And as far as keeping the Law and all its ritualistic minutia, Paul was so fastidious and single minded about doing so that he could be seen as righteous, blameless and without sin! In

other words, Paul had depended upon his obedience of the Law for his salvation, and was convinced that he was – as far as Jewish Law would demand – right before God.

“Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection of the dead” (3:7-11).

This is perhaps Paul’s strongest testimony of faith found in his writings. And it is an exceedingly powerful testimony. All that he had gained by being a faithful Pharisee, student and practitioner of the Law, all that he had gained in position, prestige and influence as a rabbi, Paul counts as loss next to “the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord”. Coming to know Christ and to embrace faith in him has become the entire focus, meaning and purpose of his life. Now, all he wants is “to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death” (3:10). There is nothing else and no one else in life that he deems worthy for centering his life. Jesus is his all in all!

Paul puts this in the strongest possible language in Greek, virtually impossible to capture in English without resorting to swear words! He writes, “For Christ’s sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I might gain Christ” (vs. 8b). But the Greek word Paul uses that is here politely translated “rubbish” is the Greek slang word for human and animal excrement! A translation of “rubbish” or even of “dung” is too polite a word to use. This is the contrast Paul is building between how he now regards his old way of life in comparison to what it now means for him to follow Christ. If Paul was anything, it was that he was blunt!

There is a further use of Greek in this passage that is very intriguing with possibilities. Paul wrote, “I am found in Christ, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ” (vs. 9). The Greek phrase is *dia pisteos Christou*. It can equally be translated “through faith in Christ” or “through the faithfulness of Christ”.

In other words, Paul could be making two rather distinct statements here. He could be saying that he found Christ through his action of receiving Christ. That is, he could be emphasizing the response of people to God’s saving act through Christ. Or the alternative afforded by the second translation of the Greek is that Paul could be stating that it was through the faith (or faithful obedience) of Christ (see Phil. 2:6-11) that the way was made clear for him to embrace Christ. Paul could participate in the faithful obedience of Christ by conforming himself to Christ’s action.

With the first translation alternative, the emphasis would be upon Paul’s own action to initiate a saving relationship with Christ. With the second translation alternative, Paul would have been downplaying human effort and stating that the work of his salvation was done through the faithful obedience of Christ. The first alternative would stress that Paul found Christ. The

second alternative would stress that Christ found Paul! It seems the second is more in conformity with Paul's theology, both in Philippians (see Phil. 2:13; 3:12) and throughout his writings (Rom. 3:21-31; 5:12-21; 9:30-10:4; Gal. 2:15-21; 3:6-29).

The "high verse" of this magnificent testimony of Paul's, of course, is 3:10 – "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death". To capture the depth of what Paul has written here, one must remind one's self that the Hebrew and Greek use of the word "know" did not mean to have an intellectual understanding of something. Rather, it was used to mean to have the most intimate relationship with and knowledge of someone; that is why the word is used as a synonym for sexual intercourse.

This use of the word "know" was caught in C. G. Jung's response to an interviewer near the end of his life, when the interviewer asked him, "Dr. Jung, do you believe in God?" Jung responded, "Believe? Believe? No, I don't believe in God. I know God!" Belief was no longer necessary because Jung had come to intimately know God! That is what Paul is stating in this verse.

Paul wants to be thoroughly submerged in Christ Jesus. He wants to be made one with Christ, so that he – in his living and acting and teaching – is the very personification of Christ to those with whom he is interacting. He is possessed and even driven to experience the very depths of Christ. And that means sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in death, and experiencing the power of his resurrection. He wants to be Christ alive in his generation – truly a "Christ-one" (what the Greek word "Christian" literally means).

Paul then concludes his powerful testimony.

"Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus" (3:12-14).

Paul makes it clear that he has not spiritually "arrived". He longs to know Christ and to be thoroughly captured by Christ. But that complete accomplishment still lies ahead of him. What "lies behind" and is "forgotten" is his old Jewish heritage that once made him feel right with God (vss. 4b-6). What has been attained has been relationship with Christ by being captured by Christ's obedience and faithfulness (vss. 7-11). What lies ahead – that which Paul has not yet obtained – is perfect union with Christ and consequent sinlessness. That won't happen until after his death. But what all of Paul's life is now centered upon is "the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus". He will indeed experience one day, in all its fullness, "the resurrection from the dead" when he is one with Christ and Christ with him. And that is the chief intention and desire of Paul's life!

As we look at these four scriptures for the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent, it is clear that they are all about embracing the new that God is doing in the world. In these stories, we see individuals who embrace that new work that God is doing (the Hebrews who dare to cross the Red Sea, those that

the Psalmist tell us obey the Jubilee, Mary, Lazarus, Paul). We also see individuals who cannot embrace the new, but must hold tenaciously to their old and established understanding of how God works in the world (the Jewish leaders in Babylon, Caiaphas, the priests, the Pharisees and Sadducees). These stories show us that the call of God to move into God's new intentions for the world is given to both individuals (Mary, Martha, Lazarus, Paul) and to institutions and systems of society (the Jewish aristocracy in Babylonian captivity, the Jewish clergy aristocracy and political systems of Jesus' day).

Most intriguingly, except for Paul, those who choose to hold onto the old are those who have the most to lose in radical political and economic change, while those who are free to embrace God's new action are those who are not tightly invested in the maintenance of the systems. Thus, Caiaphas and the Jewish priestly aristocracy in the Gospel lesson and the Jewish leadership in Babylon in the Isaiah passage are at the top of their respective societies, while Mary, Lazarus and even Jesus are ordinary citizens with minimal economic investment (Jesus doesn't even have a permanent residence in which to "lay his head" Luke 9:58).

The exception is Paul. In receiving Christ, Paul had everything to lose and apparently little to gain. As he demonstrated in our Epistle lesson for today, Paul was a powerful and highly respected rabbinic Pharisee who was believed by the authorities to be of sufficient position and trustworthiness to be invested with the responsibility of coordinating the persecution and elimination of the Christian movement. Yet he had the integrity and courage that, having received clear evidence that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, could cast off his position, prestige and power as a Jewish rabbi in order to accept the stigma of publicly becoming and remaining a Christian. The reality of Paul's willingness to "regard everything else as rubbish in order that he might gain Christ" is an indication to all of us that even those in highest position and possessing the most wealth and power can embrace God's new action, even when it threatens that position and power!

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