

“A Lenten Walk, with the Bible Jesus Read, part V: Miracles”
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for March 13th 2016 (5th Sunday in Lent)
by Foster Freed

Isaiah 43: 16-21

There are, I think it's fair to say...there are two great historic events of which it can be said that they indelibly place their stamp on the book we call the Old Testament. One of those events is believed to have taken place some 1500 years prior to the birth of Christ: which is to say it is an event that occupies a kind of half-way ground between history and pre-history, namely the Exodus: the story of ancient Israel's flight from bondage in Egypt. The Exodus, and its aftermath—the giving of the law at Mount Sinai—provides a continuous point of reference for all of the other Old Testament stories.

The other key historic event can be dated far more precisely because it falls nearly 1000 years later, some 600 years prior to the birth of Christ. That event is known as the Exile, the Babylonian Exile, when the army of Babylon (situated in what we today know as Southern Iraq) overran Jerusalem and exiled most of its Jewish survivors. While less pervasive in terms of its explicit presence in the Old Testament, it can safely be said that the shock of the Exile was a key force in the shaping of our Bibles, providing an urgent need for the Jewish scribes—now in exile—to shape their sacred literature into an orderly whole. Exodus and Exile: two very different historic events but two events that exert an incalculable influence on the shape and the substance of the Bible Jesus read. Case in point: events that play a crucial role in this morning's text.

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As I noted a few Sundays back, the book Isaiah is generally believed to incorporate the prophecies of at least three different prophets, prophets who were likely part of a particular school of prophecy. This morning's reading from Isaiah 43 is believed to come from the second of those Isaiahs, the one who would have called Babylon his home. In other words: this Isaiah, the so-called second Isaiah, was part of the exiled community living in the suburbs of the city of Babylon, after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. The vocation of this particular prophet therefore has a distinctive flavour. Preaching to a people who were already down-and-out, there was very little need for this Isaiah to inform them of their wretchedness. They knew they were in exile. And they knew they were never going back to Jerusalem: their people were done, their story was ended, their God had abandoned them. Except...well, except for the inconvenient fact that they were wrong! On the horizon a new power was emerging: the Persians, East of Babylon, what we modern day people speak of as Iran. And their King, Cyrus, once he was in control of Babylon would—surprise, surprise—invite the Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem. And yes...

It was the singular privilege of the prophet we now know as Second Isaiah, to proclaim the coming day of that magical day. Nor does Isaiah, still part of the Exile, fail to recognize the momentousness of what is about to happen, causing him to make explicit reference to the earlier event, namely the Exodus.

*This is what the LORD says—
he who made a way through the sea,
 a path through the mighty waters,
 who drew out the chariots and horses,
 the army and reinforcements together,
 and they lay there, never to rise again,
 extinguished, snuffed out like a wick.*

There's a sense you see, in which Isaiah is presenting God's credentials. The God who is about to speak to you through me, says Isaiah, is the God who made it possible for your ancestors to escape from the clutches of the Pharaoh, the God who parted the waters so that they could cross over in safety, the God who re-gathered the waters so Pharaoh's armies could not overtake them. With that by way of introduction, Isaiah steps aside so that God's voice can be heard!

*"Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.
See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness
 and streams in the wasteland."*

Forget the former things! In other words, forget all about the Exodus. Don't dwell on it any longer! I—I the LORD your God—I am doing a new thing! An even more dramatic thing! You—my people—against all odds, will return from exile, will return to your city, will return to your land!

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The story is told...the story is told of Frederick the Great, the King of Prussia during the middle decades of the 18th century....the story is told of Frederick the Great, that he one day turned to one of his advisers...

...there seems to be considerable discrepancy as to which advisor he actually turned, but the story always involves Frederick, so we're going to assume it really happened!

...the story is told that Frederick (who had come under the influence of the sceptical philosophy of Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire)...the story is told that one day Frederick turned to one of his advisors and said to them: "Can you give me one single irrefutable proof of God?" One

single proof...one single irrefutable proof of God!" To which this adviser famously provided a two-word reply: "Die Juden"...or in English: "The Jews".

And please: let's be clear what that answer does **not** mean. It does not amount to Frederick having been told: "Hey! There's this really neat group of folks I'd like you meet, because they're so terrific that when you meet them, you'll be sure to really dig them! In fact, Fred, you'll be so impressed with them (one day they'll produce some world-class physicists, and a boatload of terrific stand-up comics!)...you'll be so impressed with them Fred, that you'll instantly realize that for such a terrific group of people to exist, surely there must be a god!" No, that's definitely not the point. No the point is this...a point that can perhaps best be addressed by asking a small handful of questions!

Where are the ancient Sumerians, the forerunners of the Babylonians? For that matter, where are the ancient Assyrians, the proud people who overran the northern Kingdom of Israel about a hundred years before the Babylonians overran the southern Kingdom? Where are the Babylonians? Where are the Persians and their fine culture? For that matter: what happened to all of the other cultures that regularly overran the tiny strip of land we think of as ancient Israel? The ancient Egyptians? The ancient Greeks? The ancient Romans? Oh yes: their descendants are with us to this day, ironically mainly found worshipping either the Jewish Messiah Jesus, or the religion that was subsequently revealed to Mohammed, a religion that bears almost obsessive traces of the Old Testament's monotheism. Last time I checked, not many of the modern day Greeks worship Zeus, not many of the modern day Romans worship Jupiter, and for evidence of recent adherence to the Babylonian god Marduk, you'll need to rent a DVD copy of Ghostbusters! And yet, the Jewish people, their religion, their culture, their neuroses, just keep on ticking, sort of like the Ever-ready bunny.

And the argument, or so it goes, is that all of that is wildly improbable. **Was** already wildly improbable at the time of Isaiah, when the Babylonian exile ought (by any human reckoning) to have brought the whole show to a close. Is even more wildly improbable today, when even 1600 years of ghetto existence—for the most part living against the backdrop of either Christian or Islamic cultures, both of which had compelling reasons to distrust them, and in the aftermath of such especially virulent modern day-haters as Hitler and Stalin—despite it all, the story of Jewish existence is far from over. It's hard not...hard not to wonder...to wonder whether indeed we have here something of an at least vague trace of God's hand! It's hard not to wonder whether this weirdly unlikely story does not in fact constitute something of a miracle...something of a miracle.

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There...finally...there's that awkward word: the one that gives this sermon its one word title. Miracle! Miracle! A word with which so many of us struggle, and yet a word from which there is, I think, no getting away if we are to take the

Christian revelation, if we are to embrace the Christian story with even a modicum of seriousness. And you know: the fact that we are a mere two weeks away from the annual celebration of the big-ticket miracle that has defined the Church from its inception—

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Even in Lent, Christ is risen!

...the fact that the feast of Christ's resurrection is well in view, and that there would, quite frankly, be no such thing as the Church apart from the rumours of Christ's resurrection: all that only serves to heighten the extent to which we dare not pretend that miracles are of no interest to us, no matter how much we may struggle with them. And our struggles, I think, are two-fold.

On the one hand, we struggle with the miraculous, because we are people who believe in a **just** God. And yes: why would a just God choose to miraculously cure a neighbour of cancer, but have nothing to offer a beloved grand-daughter as she lay dying? Why would God intervene on behalf of the armies of one nation, but permit another's troops to be slaughtered? Indeed: why would God—assuming the example handed to Frederick the Great is even modestly correct—why would God call out one people and find a way, against all odds, to preserve their religion, their culture, their heritage? Or, to push things one further step: of all the men and women unjustly condemned to death over the centuries, why would God intervene in one instance, raising up to new life one man, setting apart our Jesus, our crucified Christ? (Incidentally: for what it's worth, I think Christ's resurrection provides the key clue to all of those questions, namely that every one of the miracles God works is meant to serve not as the private possession of the immediate beneficiary, but is meant to serve as yeast that leavens the whole loaf...that blesses all who draw near to the miracle).

At any rate: the other great source of our discomfort with miracles—our uniquely modern discomfort if you please—involves the extent to which modern culture marinates us in the legacy of the Enlightenment: a legacy that holds that the only road to genuine knowledge is the road that runs through the scientific method. Anything else, as philosophers such as Voltaire would have been only too happy to assure King Frederick of Prussia...anything else is well-meaning nonsense at best...and, at worst...a far from harmless way of duping the gullible. In this highly secular culture in which we British Columbians live and move and have our being, that's powerful stuff, making it awkward to admit that you are part of a faith-community whose faith is grounded in the miraculous. Indeed: I believe we Christians face a special challenge in that regard. Observant Jews, after all, can maintain that their adherence to an ancient law code helps them to make sense of their daily life regardless of how they received that code of law. Muslims can pretty much make the same claim. You see: the codes of law embedded in the Torah and the Koran can pretty much stand regardless of the extent to which one gives credence to the miraculous accounts of Moses or Mohammed. But Christianity without the risen Christ? I don't think so!

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Well! It's probably worth recalling...probably worth recalling, that our tradition—loudly and clearly—our tradition views empty-headed credulity with even more disdain than it views stubborn scepticism. To follow Christ—to follow the risen Christ—most certainly does not mean parking one's brains at the curb! God forbid! We are not meant to swallow every miraculous account that crosses our desk, any more than we are to put blind faith in every headline run by the *National Enquirer!* God forbid! As a matter of fact: I sometimes think that the key step in overcoming our shyness where the possibility of miracles is concerned...

...the key step may not be that of embracing the miraculous with deep certainty, but rather a simple willingness to let go of some of the alternative certainties our culture wishes to feed us. To quote the non-Biblical verse I prefer above all others, courtesy of Shakespeare's Hamlet...a University student who was most definitely poised on the brink of our modern, sceptical, scientific age:

As Hamlet so memorably puts it in words spoken to a fellow University student: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio....there are more things in heaven and earth....than are dreamt of in your philosophy." More things in heaven and earth than are contained in Horatio's philosophy...and for that matter...**any** of our cherished philosophies. And it seems to me that all...that all our faith demands of us...is an openness to wonder...an openness to wonder, to the **possibility** that there are indeed, more things in heaven and earth than any of us can even begin to ask, let alone imagine. Good things! Gracious things. And all of them ours! Through the boundless love, and endless creative energies, of the God for whom all things are possible!

*"Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.
See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?"*

This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ! Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ!