

“An Easter Celebration, with the Bible Jesus Read”
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
For March 27th 2016 (Easter Sunday)
by Foster Freed

Isaiah 65: 17-25

*For I am about to create
new heavens and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.*

Let me begin, this morning...let me begin by offering what will be new information for those who don't regularly attend Trinity...and what will be a reminder for those who do.

Over the past six weeks, we've been journeying through the season of Lent, making use of a small handful of passages drawn from what we Christians refer to as the Old Testament. In other words, we've been looking at Lent through the lens provided by the Bible Jesus read. Think of it this way. Some 2000 years ago, Jesus would not have been able to consult the letters of Paul, since they had yet to be written. Nor would he have been able to look to the Gospel accounts of Mark or Matthew, Luke or John, to check as to whether he was getting the details of his life in the correct order! No. **His** Bible was the Bible that serves, in effect, as the very large preface to what is, for most Christians, the heart of the matter: the much smaller volume we speak of as our New Testament, the volume which gives us the story of Christ, the story of his first disciples, as well as a series of profound meditations on what the story of Christ means. None of that material, however, would have been available to Jesus himself, which makes it more than a little relevant to view Lent...

...or, as I am hoping to do this morning, to view Easter, through an Old Testament lens: in other words, through the lens provided by the Bible Jesus read.

Before I go there, however, let me preface everything that follows by stating clearly where I stand vis a vis what is surely the central event in the Christian calendar: the celebration of Christ's resurrection. As those of you who have been watching CBC news over the weekend will know, we United Church clergy can be all over the map when it comes to our faith stance on a whole range of issues. I have no need to get into any kind of disputation with others of my breed, nor do I have any need to tell you what I believe in order to twist your arms until your beliefs match mine. But I think you have a right to know where I stand on the subject of Easter, without any coyness on my part. Here's my bottom line.

I come at Easter straight, no chaser. I accept the story of the Empty Tomb pretty much at face-value, although my faith would not be shaken were I to learn that some of the details are not precisely as they were said to have been. More importantly, I fully accept the New Testament accounts of encounters with the Risen Christ, encounters in which he assures his friends that he is more alive than ever. In short, when we—in our liturgy—proclaim that “Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed!”, I have no need to cross my fingers, hold my breath, or quietly tell myself that the resurrection is really a metaphor for something else, say the birth of the church or the spiritual renewal of the disciples. No! When I speak of the Resurrection, I speak of an actual event taking place in time: an eruption of God’s eternity into our time, if you please. Can I prove any of that? Of course not! Ought I, as a person of faith, therefore hide any of that? Of course not! Here I stand...I can do no other. Which most certainly does not alter—not in the least—my initial proposition: namely, that it should be of some interest to us, how the event of Easter looks when viewed through an Old Testament lens! What does Christ’s resurrection look like, when looked at from the perspective of the Bible Jesus read?

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Some of you...some of you with long memories...may recall a diagram that was popular in Sunday School classrooms back in the day. The diagram took the form of two funnels, joined together at the slimmest point in the middle. There...there on the screen is an image of one of those two funnels; couldn’t locate an image of two funnels joined in the centre. At any rate, the point of the diagram—which represented an oversimplification but not a downright distortion—the point of the diagram was to show Biblical history, from Genesis to Revelation. And so, at the very wide end of that funnel, is the story of creation: the creation of the vast cosmos. Then the funnel narrows, and we focus on life here on earth, shortly narrowing again with the creation of the human race. With nary a trace of narrowing, we learn of the rescue of that same human race, through a man named Noah. But then the funnel really begins to narrow, with God calling a particular segment of the human family through Abraham...a segment that gets further narrowed when the story focuses not on Abraham’s first born son, Ishmael, but exclusively on his younger son, Isaac. Then it grows narrower still, when the story focuses not on Isaac’s older son Esau, but on his younger son Jacob. And then...

...well then, Jacob has a whole raft of sons which means, when his name gets changed to Israel, that the story subsequently follows the adventures of the children of Israel, the so-called twelve tribes. Things don’t go well for them once they are planted in their own land; they abuse their freedom and ten of those tribes disappear, vanish without a trace; hence, the funnel grows narrower still. Now all that remains is the large tribe of Judah and teeny tribe of Benjamin: both of which wind up exiled to Babylon, struggling to hang on over the succeeding centuries. The funnel, you see, gets narrower and narrower until....

...well, until at the narrow end of the first funnel, all that remains is one lone, solitary Judean. A man named Jesus. And through him God accomplishes the work God had hoped to accomplish from the very beginning: which is why...

...which is why it is so important that the first funnel be joined at the small end with a second funnel: one that expands back out...one that explodes exponentially through that one solitary Judean, to form a blessing for the entire human race and, indeed, a blessing for all creation! And it is my contention...my contention that it is in the voices of the Old Testament prophets...

...it is through the poetic speech of those like Isaiah, those whose words and visions are preserved for us in the Bible Jesus read, it is in their writings that we catch the most vivid glimpse of the ultimate meaning of the explosion of spiritual power of which the resurrection of Jesus Christ is in many ways the opening salvo.

*For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.*

*But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating;
The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!*

They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.

A vision of renewal! A vision that most certainly **begins** with a specific people—the Jewish people—and with a particular city, Jerusalem...but which expands its wings to incorporate not only all of humanity, but nature itself. *The wolf and the lamb feeding together! The lion eating straw like an ox! They shall not hurt or destroy...on all my holy mountain.* Thus saith the Lord!

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That's an awfully big mouthful...perhaps more than we can digest on an Easter Sunday. But you know! I'm reminded of the title of J.B. Phillips best known book: *Your God is Too Small!* Your God: too small! And yes, to be fair: there are **other** times when I suspect that our real problem is that our God is too large: too large and remote and aloof to care about the likes of little old you or little old me, aw shucks! But no: on Easter Sunday, Phillips' point is well taken: namely, that the God we worship here, is a God whose vision for us exceeds our wildest expectations...our fondest hopes...our most outlandish dreams. And God is far from content with offering us the Resurrection of Jesus as a kind of diversion: a side-show for the perennially young and the eternally restless!

In truth...in truth...there is a way of speaking about our Christian faith, a way of speaking about the resurrection of Jesus Christ, that fails to cross the crucial bridge between **His** work and witness...**His** life, death and resurrection...a way of speaking of Jesus that fails to bridge the divide between what God was up to then and there, and what God is up to here and now! In effect, when that happens, we only have one half of that double funnel in view; we see how highways and byways of Israel's God eventually lead to Christ, but we fail to recognize how that impacts the lives we live, the faith we harbour, the hopes we stubbornly refuse to relinquish. You see: if Christ is the centre of our faith—as disciples he certainly **ought** to be the centre of our faith—if Christ is at the centre, he forms a centre around which revolves a circumference that has neither beginning nor end: a circumference that yearns to incorporate and renew all creation. And you know:

...that's why the Apostle Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians, speaks of the risen Christ as the first-fruit...the first fruit of what God has initiated in and through the resurrection. It's a starting point; it's not the end-game. And then there's also this: namely...

...well, namely the somewhat embarrassing fact that all those cutesy little metaphors we employ as analogies with which to explain the resurrection to children, those analogies aren't as entirely wrong-headed as we old-fashioned traditionalists sometimes claim them to be. Oh yes: there is a qualitative difference between a butterfly leaving the cocoon, or a tulip bursting forth from its bulb: a qualitative difference between such things and a corpse breaking free from the tomb. Any idiot knows that. But what those images of butterflies and spring flowers do manage to convey, is that the resurrection entails not only continuity but also transformation. Not only unending duration in time, but new creation into God's eternity. And God help us!

God help us if that were not the case! The resurrection of Christ was not the same thing as that moment in the Frankenstein movie, when Boris Karloff gets off the table and does the monster mash! And the promise of **our** resurrection...**our** renewal...**our** transformation, is not simply more of the same. My God! If the resurrection promise to us were merely the promise of endless duration within the world we presently inhabit, how eager would we be to sign on for that? An eternal destiny that would see us forever turning on the evening news just before going to bed, so we can hear the latest idiocies from the U.S. Presidential primaries? Waking up the following morning to discover where the latest outrage has occurred: outrages which more often than not are committed in the name of God? If that's what affirming the resurrection means, then frankly you can count me out!

Friends in Christ! In the resurrection of the One in whose name we have gathered this day, God has truly begun a new thing. No mere diversion, no magic trick, but rather the revelation of a mystery: a glimpse of the future to

which we ourselves are called. Called to embrace the tantalizing possibility of genuine renewal...of genuine life, and yes: as those who have caught a glimpse of that tantalizing possibility, the call to live here and now with courage and compassion: the courage and compassion now opened to those who have heard the hard to fathom news that the grave is not the end, that God-in-Christ has indeed, begun, a new thing!

*For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating;
The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!
They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain,
says the LORD.*

Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed! Let the whole world rejoice! Let God's people rejoice! Let us embrace the freedom and hope that is ours in the resurrection of our Lord. Thanks be to God!