

“Wellsprings”

A Sermon on Isaiah 43:16-21
Ross Tarpley, April 7, 2019

Isaiah 43:16-21 Complete Jewish Bible (CJB)

Here is what *Adonai* says, who made a way in the sea, a path through the raging waves; who led out chariot and horse, the army in its strength — they lay down, never to rise again, snuffed out and quenched like a wick: “Stop dwelling on past events and brooding over times gone by; I am doing something new; it’s springing up — can’t you see it? I am making a road in the desert, rivers in the wasteland. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; because I put water in the desert, rivers in the wasteland, for my chosen people to drink, the people I formed for myself, so that they would proclaim my praise.”

This is one of our sacred prophecies.

Thanks be to God.

—(Prayer)—

Friends, I’m going to let you in on a little secret: time-travel is REAL. I’m serious. The myths and fantasies and hypotheses about its existence are *all* true! The mechanics of it, however, are a bit elusive. Imaginative interpretations often include aspects of parallel universes and competing timelines; cause-and-effect thinking supposes that an action, if somehow altered in the past, will change present and/or future outcomes. However, as one renowned Doctor has put it: “from a non-linear, non-subjective viewpoint, [time is] more like a big ball of wibbly-wobbly, timey-wimey stuff.”¹ Further study and academic breakthrough has been achieved by the scholar, Amy Poehler. Her work has brought us these insights: “You can control time. You can stop it or stretch it or loop it around. You can travel back & forth by living in the moment & paying attention. Time can be [a tool] if you just let go of the ‘next’ & the ‘before.’” “[This] is the key to time travel[:] You can only move if you are actually in the moment. You have to be where you are to get where you need to go.”²

Now, some of you might be writing me off as delusional or dramatic—and those are sometimes not unfounded assertions of me as a person. But I’m telling the truth! In fact, in order to prove myself, I’d like to invite you all into a little demonstration of time-travel. I’m going to show you an example by doing it myself! (Please keep hands and feet inside the time machine at all times... or, all wibbly-wobbly moments.)

—(pause for dramatic effect...)—

¹ From the 10th Doctor (played by David Tennant) of BBC’s *Doctor Who*.

² See her work in the chapter titled “Time Travel” in her memoir, *Yes Please* (2014).

I see a small boy. Oof! He just got in trouble for running inside the church. He genuinely feels embarrassed because he should have “known better.” But it’s okay. He’ll understand one day that it’s okay to be a kid; life is too short to always be so serious and “adult” with oneself. Anyway, now he’s in children’s choir rehearsal with “Miss” Sandi. This is the highlight of his weekend. “Big church” is nice and all, but it’s just less exciting to have to sit still for so long. They sit down and do some silly warmups together, but “Miss” Sandi is quite earnest about her rule of “BUSFOFEBU”—that is, “back up straight, feet on floor, eyebrows up!” He is okay with these regulations for a while because he is happy to be singing... Now he and the rest of the choir are in the front of the sanctuary, and he is singing his first solo! I can’t decipher what song it is, but it doesn’t really matter. The look in his eyes says it all: sheer TERROR. But also unmatched delight. It’s no wonder his passion for music is so strong—he started so young!

He’s a bit older now and wearing a school uniform: khaki shorts and a solid red polo. He always liked the red ones. White got dirty too easily and navy was too dark looking. His dad is picking him up from the Jr. High, which is out of the ordinary, as he normally walks to his parents’ dry cleaning business a few blocks downtown. Dad’s Chevy truck is as black and shiny as it can be—dad *always* took excellent care of his vehicles. He climbs inside and, to his surprise, his dad informs him that they’re going to drive 30 minutes to Longview so that he can finally buy his long-awaited Xbox 360! He had saved Christmas money, but his parents told him to wait until the video gaming consoles went on sale after the holidays. His dad tells him that he’s already called Target and had them set one aside for him. This childlike spontaneity is a bit unlike dad, but the boy is fully unhesitant in agreeing to the father-son adventure. Despite his present contentment, he is unaware that in a matter of months life will take a sharp twist when his father is diagnosed with a terminal illness. But he doesn’t need to know that yet. This small moment is precious and holy enough to sustain and comfort him for *years* ahead.

Things have changed yet again. He’s grown into his slender body a bit more, his facial hair grows a bit more freely, and he’s understanding more of what it’s like to take care of himself. The seemingly happenstance events that led him to Baylor University are rarely on the forefront of his mind, but he is not oblivious to the mysterious provisions of God along the way. He is diligent about his studies, having changed his academic pursuits just a few months prior after experiencing a call to vocational ministry. He sits awestruck in his “Intro to Christian Theology” class as the *brilliant* but humble Dr. Natalie Carnes facilitates discussions on broad

topics within Christian thought as well as on specific works like *The Great Divorce* by C. S. Lewis. Later, he is enamored by the artistry and nuance found within the Psalms and Wisdom literature as Dr. Bill Bellinger brings excitement and life to these ancient texts. Later still, his provocative World Religions professor speeds full throttle into controversial conversations and invites to his class diverse guests like Charley Garrison, the pastor of Waco's Metropolitan Community Church. Though he is now more a young man than a boy, his heart pounds, and he begins to panic. That dingy room in Old Main begins to shrink more and more. The small boy still deep within him feels suddenly hopeful about this theological affirmation—could God truly love and accept small boys who were *different*? But the reflexes of fear and tradition squash this curiosity with fierce judgment and theological certitude. The eternal fate of his soul hangs in the balance... But it's okay. He'll understand one day that God's love indeed holds *no* bounds.

Suddenly, things are starting to look and feel a bit more familiar. The young man has gone through quite a bit of change. As a seminary student he is learning more and more about God and himself as a person of faith; and he has come to a place of deep contentment regarding his own heart and soul. But while stretching these new muscles of identity and reconciliation, he continues to lose little pieces of himself as he is forced to build and maintain barriers with people who wouldn't understand. The powers that be at school and work keep him simultaneously growing as a minister and decaying as a human—he is divided and must remain cautious. But he also just finished submitting an application for an open position at Lake Shore Baptist Church, a place he has been paying close attention to the past two years. And as he imagines the possibility of what comes next, he breathes a sigh of relief and manages to hold another piece of himself on for a little while. A step in the direction toward hope and joy and peace is worth the mystery. Little does he know the growth and healing that will take place over the next year...

There. See? I told you. Time-travel. —(*Mic drop.*)— But if you're *still* unconvinced, then let us turn to the Scriptures for further proof of this “totally infallible scientific truth.”

Much like the whole canon of Scripture as a whole, the book of Isaiah itself is a literary patchwork masterpiece. With three fairly distinct sections, there is widespread scholarly agreement that Isaiah was composed by various authors—or prophetic schools—over the course of about three centuries. The textual and archaeological clues supporting this theory also offer us context on the significance of today's Isaiah passage. The poetry of this text is attributed to “Second Isaiah,” an altogether anonymous prophet speaking to Israel in the 6th century BCE.

With the fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple in 587, the people of YHWH were now in Babylonian exile. The Davidic monarchy had come to a disastrous end, and with it the Holy City of God now lay desolate.³ With their homes and rulers gone, the Israelites then had to ask, “What does it mean to be God’s covenant people without the signs of the covenant we once knew?” Cue time-travel!

Second Isaiah harkens back to the most significant event in Israel’s salvation history: the Exodus. So important is this story within Israel’s narrative that it is one of the most referenced events within Scripture itself. For Israel, this tradition is paramount to understanding who they are and who God is. YHWH’s faithfulness, justice, and deliverance for a people in bondage was most expressed in this event; and this event most fully established the identity of the Hebrew people. So the poet steps far back into time to recall God’s fulfilling work leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt—he reminds his audience that YHWH made a dry path through the sea and snuffed out Pharaoh and his army. And this is the word he claims that God has for them now: “Stop *dwelling* and *brooding* on the past! I am doing something *new*; even now it is springing up — can’t you see it?” Isaiah foreshadows Amy Poehler’s work: Israel is not present to where they are in the moment. Their fixation not only skews their view of the past, it imprisons them in *one* version of the present.

But like my own exploration in time-traveling earlier, although you can’t *change* things that have happened, you can reinterpret and reappropriate them based on what you know *now*! *This* is the mystical work of our Scriptures! Second Isaiah makes this move: “See, I am making a road in the desert, rivers in the wasteland.” This language is also reminiscent of Israel’s experience following the Exodus. YHWH led the people through the wilderness with pillars of fire and cloud, providing water bursting forth from rocks. Yet the poet suggests that this act of God is incomplete—God *is making* and will *continue to make* ways in the wilderness and wellsprings in the wasteland.

However, this is not the same road as last time; it cannot be. For captive Israel, the inflated egos and nationalism that garnered stern critique from earlier prophets had to be left behind. Their former, exclusive Zionist Theology had to die—to then be resurrected into “something new.” This New Exodus was toward the liberation of God’s unconditional promises of grace to all peoples, as Israel was called to be “a light to the nations”—Jews and Gentiles

³ E.g. compare Isa. 30:19 to 44:26.

alike.⁴ Second Isaiah acknowledges the theological cleansing that Israel must undergo before returning to Jerusalem. From there, the prophetic tradition of Isaiah continued into the 5th century BCE with the construction of the 2nd temple, but the time-travel began to look forward—into the future. With this reinterpretation of things past and things present, the prophet sees God’s Holy Hill was then to be “a house of prayer for all peoples.”⁵ Zionist language becomes not lines of exclusion and intolerance, but a new, universal covenant rooted in faithfulness to the God of all creation.⁶ “Mother Zion” provides milk and nourishment to all, and God will bring all things to fullness in the new creation and new Jerusalem. The prophetic voices show us the difficulty—and yet the beauty—of time-traveling to the future: it’s always rooted in *hope*. Hope for restoration; hope for reconciliation; hope for new wellsprings to burst forth in our deserts.

I want you to join me in time-traveling once again—this time to the future. My very first time instituting and serving communion on my own was last October at Waco’s “Out on the Brazos” Pride event. Rather last minute in getting supplies for Lake Shore’s sponsor table, I had the idea of bringing some leftover bread and grape juice I saw sitting in the kitchen. About an hour later I had the opportunity to say “the body and blood of Christ for you,” to complete strangers. Proudly wearing a rainbow dove on my t-shirt, I extended my hands in the mystical grace of Christ’s salvation for the world and proclaimed “God thinks you’re fabulous” to LGBTQ friends who may have also tasted *hope* that day—a hope I anticipate is part of God’s reconciling of all things, where all known, loved, and belong.

Friends, are you in exile? Are you familiar with the wilderness? That is okay; but don’t dwell there! Our God is always up to something new—can you see it? We can rejoice, for our hopes are rooted in Jesus Christ, Immanuel, God in flesh with us. Centuries after Isaiah’s prophecy, he sat at a wellspring in the desert and spoke to a Samaritan woman, saying, “whoever drinks from the water that I give will never be thirsty again. The water that I give will become in those who drink it a spring of water that bubbles up into eternal life.”⁷ Christ himself becomes a wellspring of a abundant Life, freely flowing for all to drink. Here, as in every time and place, he offers his life to you. Will you come to the waters? Amen.

⁴ Isa. 42:5-9.

⁵ Isa. 56:7.

⁶ See Isa. 66.

⁷ John 4:14.

*And so, friends:
May the God who seeks you find you when you fall,
May the God who loves you take delight in your living,
And may the God who sends you, send you out now with joy;
For in your gladness, and in your grieving,
In your brokenness, and in your healing,
In your faithfulness, and in your leaving,
The God who made you,
The God who loves you,
The God who redeems you,
Is the God who keeps you, still.
Amen.*