

MARCH 13, 2016: FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT
Isaiah 43:16-31 Philippians 3:8-14 John 8:1-11

One of the problems we encounter reading Deutero-Isaiah in English is that we miss the prophet's frequent use of participles. Already in middle school we learned the difference between a finite verb and a participle. When, for instance, I say, "I went to the store," the verb "went" closes the action. It's over with. On the other hand, if I say, "Going to the store," the action continues. You're waiting to hear what's going to happen while I'm going to the store. The participle "going" presumes the action's continuing.

A better translation (maintaining the original Hebrew participles) of today's Deutero-Isaiah's first lines would be: "Thus says Yahweh opening a way in the sea and a path in the mighty waters, leading out chariots and horsemen, a powerful army"

Speaking to a people who've been exiled for over 50 years, the prophet is forced to deal with their "we've seen or heard it all before" frame of mind. Yahweh's wonderful acts of salvation had taken place centuries before. In the captives' minds, Yahweh's isn't doing anything right here and now to get us out of Babylon. That's where Deutero-Isaiah's participles kick in. He's convinced that what Yahweh has done for Yahweh's people, Yahweh continues to do. The action's still going on; it's never over. God's saving the Israelites in Babylon during the 530s BCE just as God saved the Israelites in Egypt during the 1200s BCE.

In some sense, this theology of God's constant salvation is also behind today's gospel pericope. Our sacred authors never thought of themselves as historians: people dedicated just to maintaining records of the past so future people would know what happened back then. On the contrary, if parallel things weren't happening in the day and age of our biblical writers, they would have never narrated them in their various works. They were only concerned about the past because it was being mirrored in the present.

In today's situation - the woman taken in adultery - the evangelist is convinced that such encounters were happening in his day and age, encounters demanding the same response to sin and forgiveness that Jesus gave during his earthly ministry. Whenever we're called upon to deal with sinners, we're never to forget that each of us is also a sinner: someone in need of forgiveness, not condemnation. Salvation never ends.

That's why today's Philippians passage is so important. Paul understands that nowhere in our history of salvation is salvation ever completely achieved. One of my favorite biblical lines is the Apostle's realization, "It is not that I have already taken hold of (the resurrection), or have already attained perfect maturity, but I continue my pursuit in hope that I may possess it, since I have indeed been taken possession of by Christ Jesus." Once we chose to let the risen Jesus take over our lives, salvation never ends. It's present in everything we do, everyone we encounter, every new day we experience.

If our dying and rising with Jesus continues, so also our salvation continues.

It's a shame some of us learned our faith in such a way that we long to return and participate in the "golden age" of that faith: the ministry of the historical Jesus. We keep forgetting that no one who personally knew the historical Jesus ever passed on anything about him that we can access today. All our Christian biblical authors - including the four evangelists - knew only the risen Jesus. They could only pass on a "participial" faith.

Perhaps our middle school religion teachers should have put as much emphasis on that, as our middle school English teachers put on diagramming a sentence.

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MARCH 20TH, 2016: PALM SUNDAY
Isaiah 50:4-7 Philippians 2:6-11 Luke 22:14-23:56

It's either ironic or somehow divinely planned that the Passion Narrative proclaimed on Palm Sunday during this official church year of mercy and forgiveness is from Luke's gospel. Lucan scholars constantly remind us that his gospel, more than the other three combined, zero in on the merciful Jesus. And nowhere is this part of his personality more stressed than in Luke's Passion Narrative.

For instance, only Luke mentions Jesus miraculously replacing the severed ear of the High Priest's servant in Gethsemane. Only Luke has Jesus pray, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do!" as his enemies pound nails in his wrists. And Luke's Jesus alone assures the repentant thief, "This day you will be with me in paradise."

As I've mentioned in other commentaries, Luke employs Jesus' mother Mary as the example of the perfect "other Christ." She fulfills the evangelist's definition of a perfect Christian: she hears God's word and carries it out. That's why today's Deutero-Isaiah reading fits perfectly into the hearing part of Luke's theology. In his third song of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh, the prophet supplies us with the most precise definition of a disciple of Yahweh. "Morning after morning," he writes, "Yahweh opens my ear that I may hear: and I have not rebelled, have not turned back."

Carroll Stuhlmueller always reminded us that God's perfect disciples constantly hit the floor every morning listening, listening today for what they missed in God's word yesterday, listening for something God hadn't even mentioned yesterday. True discipleship always revolves around listening.

Though Luke would totally agree, he especially zeroed in on listening how God wishes us to show mercy on any given day, in any given place, and to any given individual. This is certainly the word of God which he presumed followers of Jesus would not only hear, but actually carry out.

This was also the emptying out of which Paul speaks in his letter to the Philippians. In the Apostle's theology, before Jesus could be proclaimed as Yahweh (the Lord), he had to completely empty himself, taking the form of a slave. In other words, he had to identify with the lowest caste of humans.

In some sense, that's what Luke also has his gospel Jesus do. Throughout his gospel, Jesus constantly identifies with those on the fringes of 1st century CE society; with sinners, women, Samaritans. Especially, in the Passion Narrative he hears God's word about identifying with those carrying out his death sentence, even going so far as becoming one with the criminals sharing his same fate. His mercy and forgiveness seem to be the way he carries through on having heard that word.

It would seem that, though many of us became experts on giving the correct answers to catechism questions, we either flunked the course on listening, or never signed up for it. (Perhaps in some places, it wasn't even offered!)

We all know dogs can hear sound waves our human ears can't pick up. In a parallel way, our sacred authors tried to enable their readers to hear voices people around them either couldn't pick up or refused to pick up. From their own experience they knew this wasn't an easy task. The Hebrew word, for instance, which Deutero-Isaiah employs for Yahweh opening his ear every morning is the same word that in other places of Scripture is used to describe drilling out a well. The prophet is obviously convinced that hearing God's word takes a lot of effort.

Perhaps one of the best ways to celebrate this week of holiness – besides participating in the various liturgical celebrations – would be to work on our hearing. Might make mercy a lot easier to practice.