

Words of an Ancient Prophet to the Emotional Impact of Our Current Distress

Ken Wilson, 1/17/21

I love having a father-in-law later in life. I hadn't had one for quite a while. He came along with Julia. And I'm glad I didn't know him before I met Julia because I might have been tempted to marry her in order to gain him as a father-in-law. His name is Charles and he's 86 and he's in nursing home recovering from a stroke. It's hard. We can't visit him. So I started reading the daily readings that are part of his faith tradition (he's an Episcopalian) and got this book. My way of having spiritual communion with the man, since we can't visit in person.

So I've been coming to daily readings with maybe a more open/softened heart than usual because of my affection for my father-in-law. They have been speaking to me especially in our current rolling national crisis. These readings have been giving me a spiritual consolation in the desolation of this resurgent-spiraling white supremacy, how widespread, how violent. BTW if you missed Dr. Harold Trulear from Howard University last Sunday, I can't recommend it enough. While he was speaking, I was like, "I am not worthy to untie this man's sandals."

But yesterday my daily readings spoke to two things I'm dealing and I'm guessing you are too. The first is a sense of heightened vulnerability in the face of dangerous mobs threatening our democracy, bearing down on DC, and state capitols all around us. If I'm feeling it as a white man in America, I can't imagine what it must be like to occupy a less privileged space. So I'm feeling this vulnerability not only for myself, but for so many of you that I love, for whom it is more immediately dangerous. The second is a sharp sense of disgust and aversion as this mob wraps itself in religious, specifically Christian symbols. When I read news stories about how deeply this dangerous ideology has penetrated white Christian spaces, I want to vomit, and then take a shower. It's a feeling of shame by association. I'll leave that for another time. But I want to focus today on first impact: awareness of heightened vulnerability in the face of violent mobs.

It's from Isaiah 43, but it's familiar portion often understood in a very superficial and individualist way. Some background to put this text in a wider context first. And then read it again, after it was introduced this morning by Lydia.

Isaiah is part of what we call the Hebrew Bible. Many non-Jewish understandings of the Hebrew Bible and the later NT writings. Often read with Anti-Semitic lenses, a reading promulgated by prominent figures like Martin Luther among others. So let's correct for that first and then set some of the historical context to our portion in Isaiah 43.

3 Major sections to the Hebrew Bible. The first is called the Law of Moses (first five books, including Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus). Of the three major portions this is the smallest. And while it's called The Law of Moses, law and rule are actually a small portion of these writings. Most of it is narrative, stories. This idea that many people have that Judaism is all this silly preoccupation with laws and rules is false; it slanders our Jewish siblings. The State of Michigan has many more laws than ancient Israel. Every nation needs laws. And as we know, the rule of law is essential for our safety. Besides, many Christian institutions have more laws and rules than are found in the Law of Moses. In Catholic Church to get an annulment (catholic divorce) you need to hire a Canon Lawyer. So when we claim that Judaism is religion of law as if that's some silly thing, it's just a cover for anti-Semitism. The next major portion is called the writings: psalms, song of songs (erotic poem), Job, Proverbs. Nothing to do with Laws. Much of it, originally set to music.

Third major portion, Prophets. Notice it's the largest. The major writing of the prophets is called Book of Isaiah, favorite portion of Jesus to cite. Also, the most political portion of the Hebrew Bible as the prophets criticized the policies of their own nation (as loyal members of nations do) as well as the policies of corrupt-wicked rulers of any kind. When people say "the church is not political" invariably they are white people who are well served by the status quo in politics. You don't hear this in Black Churches and it's a foreign thought to the Hebrew prophets who measure justice by things like how we treat widows, orphans, the poor, and immigrants.

Our portion in Isaiah today is Isaiah 43. In antiquity very different conventions about authorship. The writings we call Book of Isaiah is a collection of writings from varied sources. The first part of the book is mostly from a real person named Isaiah, who was a prophet of the 8th century BCE, during Assyrian domination of Israel. The second part which includes Isaiah 43 is by a prophet (more than one probably) functioning two centuries later when much of Israel was exiled to Babylon. The third major section was

much later still. Think of MLK as a prophet who was part of a wider tradition, like John Louis who we lot recently. We could think of Malcolm X and James Baldwin, founders of BLM, Alicia Garza, Opal Tometti, or Bishop Evette Flunder, even though they had important differences in perspective. All their writings, in the conventions of antiquity could have been gathered in a compilation called Book of MLK.

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So let's call the prophet of Isaiah 43, Second Isaiah, anonymous to us, which means could be a woman or a man (English writer, George Eliot, was a woman). A prophet of Israel in exile in Babylon (modern day Iraq.) They have been subject to violence of oppression by a cruel foreign power, corrupt rulers—their sons/daughters subject to police violence. More than anything, they are an identifiable minority community surrounded by a majority that can turn hostile at a moment's notice. The Jewish people in Europe lived with this and still do. In Middle Ages, whenever there was a plague, minority Jewish community would be scapegoated. They would suffer from the plague *and* they would be blamed for the plague unleashing majority mobs.

That's the most important thing to realize about context of Isaiah before I read it for a second time this morning. Hear them as words spoken to a minority community still in a situation of constant threat—one that ebbs and flows, goes a little underground then flares. This threat is harbored in a majority community, portions of which could turn hostile at any moment. This community of Jewish exiles share communal memories of trauma. On top of this they are easy targets for slander, false accusations, their character impugned by the majority to justify ill treatment. They undergo a profound psychological burden.

The prophet of Isaiah 43 is feeling the divine feelings toward these people and their plight. It's intimacy love language, in words and thought forms that these people can experience as love.

The phrase "I have redeemed you" pops up—don't hear this through the lens of so much modern individualistic Christianity with its focus on personal salvation from personal sin. Salvation, redemption, ransom—these are all words in the Hebrew Bible that speak primarily of being saved from oppression, from enemies, from real tangible hostility in this life. The idea of an after-life is vague at best in Hebrew Bible. There's nothing here (or

Newer Testament) about a hell understood as eternal conscious torment, a doctrine that makes people anxious about smallest private matters—and is little more than a control mechanism.

OK are we ready? Let those thoughts fall into the background as we focus on the words that Lydia first offered us this morning.

***And now, thus says the Lord, your Creator, Jacob, and your Fashioner, Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name, you are Mine.
Should you pass through water, I am with you, and through rivers—they shall not
overwhelm you. Should you walk through fire, you shall not be singed, and flames shall
not burn you.***

***For I am the Lord, your God, Israel's Holy One, your Rescuer. I give Egypt as your
ransom, Ethiopia and Seba, in exchange for you. Because you are precious in My eyes,
and honored, and I love you. I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for
your life. Do not fear for I am with you.***

Two comments to prepare for another go at this hearing this. First, this prophet was not so naïve to think that this is a promise to individuals that nothing bad will happen them. They will skate through all dangers. It's very much what Dr. Trulear was saying last week—God with us in the midst of our troubles, not avoiding them. It's not “when you pass through the water you won't get wet.” And the “you” is collective/communal—the people, the community, will make it through as indeed it did. Because these individuals felt so connected to their communities, this was a very personal comfort.

And notice how the divine love refuses to prefer the majority over the minority. It's the opposite. The divine love is saying, “I prefer you over nations.” This is poet-prophetic, not philosophical: “I'll trade major nations for you, you're so precious to me.” Jesus, the Jewish rabbi, echoes this in his parable of the shepherd who prefers the one sheep separated from the flock to the 99 who are safe.

So now as I read it again, suggest you situate yourself in this text so that you can receive it as the divine love channeled through this anonymous prophet of old, to you. Is there a way you can identify some shared experience with these exiled people in Babylon?

Maybe you are also from another place and feel at times like a stranger in a strange land, with a longing for home. Maybe you're a woman in a male dominated workspace. Maybe your gender identity or person you love breaks some false gender or sexuality majority norms. If you are black in America or stand out as an identifiable minority of any kind, you know the feeling of these Jewish exiles in Babylon. But what if you're like me, born into a society where the rules of the majority benefit you? You can only receive these words of divine love if you are also willing to relinquish some of the unearned advantages you enjoy. If you are willing to side with, to love, to stand with the people this God is addressing. Then, it's the opposite of guilt by association; it's favor by association. So powerful, so sweet, it makes all your unearned advantage seem like trash.

MEDITATION TIME

We'll make these words our meditation time this morning. Let's take a minute now to prepare our bodies to receive these words. So if you like and free to do so, you could settle in your chair, feet planted firmly on ground. Take in and release a nice deep breath ...or two...Let your breathing return to normal and become aware of your body, just to check in with the body...feel the weight of the body...notice how your head—face, jaw, back of head, feel right now. Continue to scan down just to check in—shoulders, upper arms, chest, lower arms, hands ... mid-section, upper legs, knees, lower legs, ankles feet. Become aware again of your breathing, the feeling of air expanding your body as you breath in, and your body softening as you breath out.

Hear the words of divine love, spoken by the prophet

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Should you pass through water, I am with you, and through rivers—they shall not
overwhelm you. Should you walk through fire, you shall not be singed, and flames shall
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