

Is 55:6-13
10 July 2011

“The Word with a Mind of Its Own”

Our scripture passage in Isaiah is one of the first ones that I ever really paid attention to. There was an incident 26 years ago next month that forever set it as a milestone in my life.

Late one August evening in 1985, actually early in the morning—it was after 2:00—I’d been reading this very chapter in Isaiah. But before I get into that, I should back up a bit. Throughout that summer, for the first time in my life, I really began to have an interest in the Bible. It seemed to come alive for me. It wasn’t just a dead book; more and more, I started to see meaning in it.

So anyway, this night in early August arrives, and something happens. I’m reading this passage and thinking about two verses in particular. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (vv. 8-9).

That really struck me. No matter how high we reach, no matter what we know, our minds are unable to encompass God. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so God’s thoughts and God’s ways are higher than ours. And it became very personal for me. No matter how high my imagination, my thoughts, may go, it occurred to me, they can never reach God’s level.

And in the same instant, I realized that that’s okay. No, it’s **more** than simply “okay.” I understood, if only dimly, that God is love. I **felt** that God is love. In fact, it seemed that I was suddenly plunged into an ocean of love. It was a very intense experience, one I haven’t had since.

What **has** remained with me from that evening is a sense of inner peace. For all these reasons, I’ve tended to look upon that night as something of a conversion experience. I suppose it took something that **drastic** to get my attention!

I share this to give you a sense of how I approach today’s Old Testament text; I have some history with it. Having said that, I don’t want to **limit** my reading of it to some experience I had. I think we all understand that we are shaped by our experiences, both good and bad. However, we need not allow past experiences to **control** us, be it in the present or in the future.

That’s a message the people in our scripture passage need to hear. Chapter 55 is the end of the second major section of the book of Isaiah; this section begins with chapter 40. Sometimes called Second Isaiah, it takes place during the Babylonian exile.

The point of all this is that these words are addressed to people who have suffered very bad experiences: exile from their homes, with all that entails. They need to know that that isn’t the final word. In fact, if there’s one thing we learn from this passage, it’s that we’re dealing with a word with a mind of its own!

Just as I said that we need not let our past experiences control us, the same is true with the exiles—though that is a pretty steep mountain to climb. Being sent into exile would be something **most** of us have trouble wrapping our heads around. Even

something as devastating as having one's house flooded or burned down still isn't quite that horrific.

My experience with the words of the prophet was, and has been, positive. But it pales in comparison to his message to his own people. He's been promising them that the day is soon arriving when their time in exile will be over. He says that "you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace" (v. 12). That **really is** a positive experience!

The cynics among the people might say, "Are you sure about this? This is kind of important. Are you really sure that it's the word of the Lord you've been hearing?"

This brings us back to dealing with a word with a mind of its own. Verses 10 and 11 say, "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

Many ancient cultures believed that, once a word is spoken, it actually exists. It has power; it has a **life** of its own. Today, we call that a form of magic, but for them, it was simply the way the world works. It was how nature operates.

We see a good example of this in Genesis 27. Jacob, the younger twin, gets the blessing from his father Isaac that should go to his older twin, Esau. The old man has gone blind, and before he dies, Jacob wants to make sure he gets that blessing, the blessing of the firstborn. So he tricks his father by putting on Esau's clothing—plus some other maneuvering with his mother's collusion.

Later, when the deception is revealed, Isaac is furious, but all he can say to Esau is, "Hey, what do you want me to do? I gave the blessing to Jacob. Here, let me give you a second-rate blessing!" It's understood. Once that word is spoken—be it a good word, a blessing, or a bad word, a curse—you can't take it back!

So, the word of the Lord is sent on a mission, and as one writer puts it, when this "Word is uttered...it necessarily becomes effective to save, even though it may be deflected from its course for a time by the resistance of [human] free will...In the end, however, God's Word must inevitably reach its target."¹

Even before I encountered this quote, I had envisioned God's word hunting its prey—not resting until it had captured its quarry. I was reminded of the *Terminator* movies and TV show. You know, the cyborgs sent back from the future with orders to kill people? (Although, sometimes they have orders to protect people, so it's not always bad!)

Well, in the case of what the prophet is talking about, this word with a mind of its own is all about good news. That's quite fitting for a fellow who's been called "the evangelist of the old covenant."² This is a guy who makes it **his job** to declare good news.

We need to be aware of something, though. Even though God's word **inescapably** reaches its target, that doesn't mean that the word is navigating through a world of mindless drones. Even the cyborgs from the *Terminator*, mere machines, have **some** degree of freedom of choice! How much more we humans?

¹ George A. F. Knight, *Deutero-Isaiah* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1965), 265.

² Klaus Koch, *The Prophets: The Babylonian and Persian Periods* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 151.

With that in mind, we can't overlook how our passage begins. "Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near" (v. 6). Once upon a time, seeking the Lord meant going to the Temple, offering a sacrifice, maybe consulting a prophet. Here, it's a matter of seeking forgiveness and abandoning a way of life.³

The great prophets of the Bible are concerned with both the inner **and** outer aspects of seeking the Lord. If inner change isn't happening, then outward behavior will necessarily be shallow—and eventually, that will be revealed. At the same time, what we **actually do** obviously matters.

Still, I'm especially interested in the remainder of that verse. Seek the Lord...while he may be found; call upon him...while he is near. That doesn't sound right. Isn't God **always** near? Isn't God everywhere? Isn't God **always** waiting to be found?

I'm reminded of what I said at the beginning of the sermon, about God's thoughts and ways being higher than ours. Of course they are; we're talking about God! It's the verse right before, about the wicked forsaking their way and the unrighteous their thoughts, that helps clear it up. It's not about God being pure knowledge, but God being pure love. And that is love spoken as a word with a mind of its own.

I also said that, for the first time in my life, I had an awakening of interest in that word. Could we possibly say, at that time, God was able to be found—that God was near? That's the wonder of personal experience, as we all know. We can read the same thing, or have the same thing happen to us, and on one occasion it may mean absolutely nothing. At another time, it may seem like the fate of planet Earth is in question!

Richard Rohr quotes one of his friends: "God comes to you disguised as your life."⁴ I really like that. And why wouldn't that be true? This wondrous word with a mind of its own would surely meet us in every aspect of life. This meeting, this encounter, can be especially meaningful in a rather unsettling way.

It's when "our comfort zone has collapsed. This includes any hiatus between stages in life: separation or divorce, job change, illness, loss, death, failure of any kind. It is a graced time during which we are not certain of our next move, when we're not in control, when something genuinely new can happen."⁵

This is **no one's** idea of fun. It can be irritating. It can be terrifying. It can be heartbreaking. But if we're willing to stay open to that word, the prophet gives us a promise. "Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off" (v. 13).

³ John L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 144.

⁴ www.cacradicalgrace.org (Daily Meditation for 23 May 2011), among other places

⁵ Richard Rohr, *On the Threshold of Transformation* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2010), 224.