

The People Who Could Fly

Ken Sehested

Isaiah 40:21-31

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One of the benefits of having a rotating lineup of preachers at Circle of Mercy is that we each get to experience the inspiration of others. If I had to do this week in and week out, “the soup would get thin and the bread would get stale.”

Mark Siler’s sermon last week inspired me greatly. I especially appreciated the way he asked the embarrassing question: How do we modern folk make sense of the idea of exorcism?

We are children of the Enlightenment, reared in rationalism. Those New Testament texts that speak of Jesus casting out demons make us squirm a bit. So we usually just skip over them, pretend they’re not there. We make allowances for “pre-scientific worldviews,” as if apologizing for primitive thinking. We’ve seen movies like *Poltergeist* and *The Exorcist* too many times. For some, *The X-Files* TV series and the *E.T.* movie may be engaging entertainment, but few people playing with a full deck of cards take them seriously.

In the company of cultured friends, it’s just a bit too cheesy to talk about exorcism.

Today’s lesson in the Gospel of Mark follows immediately the text from last Sunday. And...well...there’s more exorcism. And the further you go, especially in this Gospel, the references multiply. It’s a little much for most liberal-minded folk. But should it be?

Anyone who’s ever read about “systems theory” as an analytical tool of family therapists knows about trans-personal forces and patterns and inclinations that shape us in ways we usually don’t even notice. It’s no coincidence that children who suffer abuse are more likely to become abusers. In comparison to their peers, the bullied are more likely to become bullies. Those who successfully lead violent revolutions, even with the noblest of motives, have a way of becoming tyrants.

Those who’ve worked with historically repressed populations know that getting rid of chains is only the first step to liberation. The mind itself has to be decolonized. It was the great freer of slaves Harriet Tubman who said, “I freed a thousand slaves. I could have freed a thousand more if only they knew they were slaves.”

The popular image of exorcism is silly in the extreme. But if we are to stay healthy in the poisonous and imperial environment in which we find ourselves, we simply must know more about the New Testament’s notion of exorcism. However pre-scientific its worldview, the Bible’s understanding of power is as sophisticated as it is potent.

The Apostle Paul’s cosmology may have been that of a three-storied universe, but no one since has more accurately described our dilemma: “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Ephesians 6:12).

Indeed, this insight provides part of the basis for our commitment to nonviolence. Killing most of the really bad people in the world won’t make things mostly better.

In his famous book *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau wrote, “There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root.” In our personal and congregational life, how can we tell the difference between branches and roots? How can we be more intelligent, more discerning about where we place our attention and resources?

Today, I want to focus on the lectionary text from the prophet Isaiah. This evening we learned a new chorus drawn from the last verses of chapter 40: “They who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint, help us Lord, help us Lord, in thy way.”

The historical context of this part of Isaiah is the people of ancient Israel in Babylonian captivity. In the sixth century B.C.E., the newest empire to sweep through Judea organized a forced relocation. Not of everyone, of course. Only the leading citizens—what today we might call the “creative class.”

When Isaiah wrote this portion of the book, the third generation of refugees was coming of age. No doubt the first generation kept alive all sorts of escape plans. The second generation likely began to grow tired of their parents’ stories about the good ol’ days back in Judea. Now the third generation is adapting to their captive status.

Like most imperial regimes, the Babylonians had no problem with the Judeans practicing their

Yahweh-centered religion. Empires don't need to destroy religion. They simply reorient its energy and lower its expectations. The refugees' God becomes more parochial. Likely as not, Yahweh worship was still popular; but it had been reduced to self-help therapy.

Religion has a way of becoming a coping mechanism, helping people adjust to the way things are. Dreams of life lived outside the empire grow faint. No one speaks of "exorcism" anymore, except maybe in popular entertainment.

No one speaks of *flying* anymore—no mounting up with wings as eagles. Not even running or walking—unless it's running to work in Babylonian factories, or walking to Babylonian markets. Memories fade of the days of life back in the scrubby environs of Judea, situated on the edge of the desert. Memories of the Judean deity, so wild and fierce and demanding, have been smoothed and tailored and domesticated. For most, life in Babylon had become comfortable.

Most by this time have grown to think of themselves as Judeo-Babylonians. A Babylonian meritocracy is in place: If you work hard, you, too, can enjoy the fruits of this freedom. Freedom. Yes, Babylonian freedom. Here you can achieve anything you set your mind to do. Here, if you're poor, you're given a trampoline to elevate your standard of living (so says a politician). Here, you can worship the god of your choice, shop at the markets of your convenience. Here, no one's going to make you give up your seat on the bus. Because, here, there is freedom.

I remember a story, from more than a dozen years ago, when our Cuban friend Paco Rodes came to the U.S. He was staying with friends in Atlanta, and I drove down to spend a couple days with him. As you know, many consumer goods are scarce in Cuba, and one of the things Paco wanted to take back home was a simple cabinet handle. So I drove him to a nearby big-box store—can't remember if it was Lowe's or Home Depot.

It was the first time Paco had experienced this shopping miracle. When we walked in, his eyes scanned the farthest reaches of this cavernous store, packed floor to ceiling with every imaginable item.

It took us a while, but we finally rounded a corner to a long row of displays with dozens of different types and shapes of cabinet handles. We walked midway down the aisle, and Paco suddenly stopped, looking from one end to the other, then turning his eyes toward me and with that mischievous grin he's famous for, raised his hands in the air and said with a loud voice, "FREEDOM!"

One of the reasons people like us have a hard time comprehending the biblical testimony is because most of Scripture was written for people whose backs were against the wall. People being displaced. People subject to marauding forces, and pestilence. People standing at the sea's edge with Pharaoh's army bearing down on them. Hungry people. Desperate people. People at the end of their ropes.

What you see depends on where you stand. And the comfort surrounding people like us makes it difficult to hear that another world is coming. That's why at the very root of our mission strategies is to locate ourselves intentionally outside our comfort zones, placing ourselves in some proximity to those whose lives are disvalued, disregarded, displaced, and dismembered.

We do these things not because we're nice, not because we're generous liberals or compassionate conservatives. We do these things in order to hear the Word of God. We do these things because it is in these contexts that people learn to fly. Only people with nothing left to lose are able to trust the outrageous promises of God.

The Sehested clan of which I'm a part traces its ancestral history back to a region of northern Germany that used to be part of the old Danish Kingdom. Nancy and I visited there once with my parents, including a stop at the little village of Sehested (Sees'ted) on the Kiel Canal. Then we went up for a short stay in Copenhagen.

I was determined to visit the grave of one of my intellectual heroes, the 19th-century philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, who was a fierce critic of the state church of his day. Nancy wanted to visit the home of Karen von Blixen-Finecke, the 19th-century Dane who used the pen name Isak Dineson to write her novel *Out of Africa*—but also, more significantly for Nancy, the short story *Babette's Feast*. (The film version of *Babette's Feast* was one of the conversion moments in Nancy's spiritual journey.)

Earlier tonight, for our children's story, Nancy told the African-American folktale *The People Who Could Fly*. Soren Kierkegaard wrote another fable with an extraordinarily similar message. Only in his tale, the characters were barnyard animals.

Among the animals was a flock of geese—very pious geese, if truth be told. Every seventh day

the geese paraded to a corner of the yard, and their most eloquent orator got up on the fence and spoke of the wonders of geese. He told of the exploits of their ancestors, who dared to mount up on wings and fly all over the sky. He spoke of the mercy of the Creator, who had given geese wings and the instinct to fly. This deeply impressed the gathered flock, who nodded their heads solemnly.

All this they did, week after week, every Sabbath Sunday. One thing they did not do: They did not fly, for the corn was good and the barnyard was secure.

The ancient Judeans lived not only in political captivity but in cultural and spiritual captivity as well. No doubt some among them still longed for the covenant terms of Yahweh God, for life lived on a wing and a prayer, for swimming on a wild ocean of faith—and this is a Kierkegaard image—an ocean of faith whose bottom was 10,000 leagues below. The terms of such faith are risky; but the rewards are beyond calculation.

The closing sentences of Isaiah 40 are among the most memorable in the Bible: The Untamed God “gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted. But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

How about you? How about us? What does it mean to “wait” on the Lord? How is that different from passivity?

How is the weariness mentioned in Isaiah different from our middle-class weariness of too many meetings, too many appointments, maybe too many charitable engagements and too many distractions?

The *fort* in *comfort* is from the Latin, meaning “to fortify, to strengthen.” How is that different from a “happy meal” or “comfort food” or “casual Friday” or a Disneyland vacation?

How can we learn to strike at the root of evil, and not simply hack away at its branches? Can we be formed in the faith that is more than charitable busyness, in faith that actually has the power to exorcise demons—rather than simply shoo them from one room to another, from one institution to another, from one neighborhood to another. Can we be schooled in the faith that is more than playing whack-a-mole?

How is it that we can structure our common life so that we fortify each other in ways that allow us to breathe outside the confines of our own empire? What are the implications of learning to fly?

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Or, as Martin Luther King once said, in reference to this text from Isaiah: “If you can’t fly, then run. If you can’t run, walk; and if you can’t walk, crawl. But by all means, keep moving forward!” Can the flyers and the runners and the walkers, and even the crawlers, live together in this community, and do so without reference to status or rank? May it be so.

Amen