

God Speaks

Isaiah 52:7-10

John 14:1-14

According to the Harper Study Bible, “God's deliverance of his people from Babylon was a figure of Jesus Christ's redemption of people.” That sentence packs a lot of meaning. Earlier in Isaiah 52, the prophet reminded his readers that God had delivered the people from Egypt. Which means the whole history of God's relationship with God's chosen people was rooted in deliverance. Whether the escape from Egypt, or the return of the Children of Israel from exile in Babylon, which happened some 800 years later, or the appearance of the Messiah, which happened some 575 years after this chapter of Isaiah was written, the salvation history of the whole Bible carries the same theme: God has promised to save God's people, and God keeps God's promise. In fact, we can extrapolate the timeline even farther in both directions. Go back to Abraham and you find the earliest known covenant God offers. This happened some 300 years before Moses appeared. Go forward to Revelation and we find a final consummation of God's covenant which has yet to happen.

We return to the middle of the timeline, to Isaiah. An unknown person wrote chapter 52 some years after the eponymous prophet's death. Events have begun to coalesce around the fulfillment of the actual Isaiah's prophecies that the Children of Israel, languishing in slavery to Babylon, will go home to the Promised Land. This

anonymous prophet sees a vision of a messenger appearing “upon the mountain”. This can refer only to Mt. Zion, the temple mount in Jerusalem. And what message does the messenger bring? He brings, “...good news, (he) announces salvation.” To the Jewish people hearing this vision, salvation probably meant restoration, the return home and the rebuilding of the nation and the temple. It meant freedom and a return to the good favor of God.

We understand salvation through the lens of Jesus' preaching. Jesus offered new life and, as we shall see, a room in his father's mansion. He spoke not only of deliverance in this life, but also in the next. The prophecy in Isaiah 52 concludes with, “all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.” Again, this refers to what would soon happen in the Promised Land, in this realm. In this time and space. Jesus repeatedly made it clear the salvation he offered was a both/and salvation. His birth in this world inaugurated his realm here and now. The poor would receive sustenance. The blind would receive sight. Those who followed him would experience peace and grace. Here and now. *But*. They could also hope for eternal life in communion with himself and all others who followed him.

Madeleine L'Engle wrote many books, for children, youth and adults, fiction and non-fiction, memoir and poetry. Her faith informed her work. She wrote [A Wrinkle in Time](#) and its four sequels. Their unifying theme, as with much of her work, was the struggle between good and evil, with a mysterious yet loving force of pure good prevailing against the evil. An Episcopalian, L'Engle's writing struck conservative

Christians as universalist. That is, she believed in the salvation of all, and she wrote from that perspective. For this reason, many conservative Christian bookstores would not and do not carry her books. On the other hand, she injected enough of her sincere faith into her work that some secular critics panned it. She became known as the Preacher of Litchfield, after Litchfield, Connecticut, where she lived.

L'Engle published [A Circle of Quiet](#) in 1972. It was an introspective look at the intersection of faith and science in her own thought. Always one to see support for her belief in scientific discoveries, she wrote of how the emerging field of quantum mechanics confused and yet awed her with a deepening sense of the “necessity of God”. Theories like the curving space/time continuum and the existence of “weird” building blocks of matter far smaller than atoms (atom from the Greek for “nothing smaller”), forced her to question how it could all come to be without an omnipotent God. Moreover, this train of thought led her to ponder the possibility of a “both/and arrangement”. If, as quantum physics posited, parallel or alternate universes exist, could one or more of them, as she wrote, “house heaven”? Could we interpret Jesus' teaching to say that when we die to this life, we enter life in another space/time? Does salvation happen both here, and in one of them?

Such deep and insightful leaps of intuition characterized much of L'Engle's writing. So did humility. Rarely did she propose a theory, no matter how creative, without adding that hers were only the thoughts of one person untrained in the sciences. But the Bible seems to propose something close to her both/and ideas.

Isaiah 52, while cited by Christians as a “figure” of Jesus, a foreshadowing of his appearance as the Savior, spoke initially to a geopolitical event. God would work through the nations to deliver the people of God in this world. Yet Jesus spoke of having come from the father and eventually returning to the father. His phrasing makes it reasonably clear the father exists in and beyond this time and space. Both/and. Salvation can happen here. Salvation can happen there.

Our passage in the Gospel of John follows two significant moments. Jesus has just announced—again—his return to the father. He tells his followers, “where I go, you cannot follow”. And he urges them to love one another even as he has loved them. The impetuous Peter objects and claims he will do anything, including laying down his life, to stay with Jesus. But Jesus tells him that “before the cock crows you will deny me three times.” This tells us the day when all this happens: Maundy Thursday, the day before Jesus' crucifixion. That night the Jews will arrest Jesus and haul him off to the High Priest's villa. Peter will follow all the way to the outer courtyard, where he joins others warming themselves at a bonfire. Three times people will ask him if he follows the arrested man inside. Three times he will deny he does. But before this happens John tells us Jesus has a few more things to say. The timing suggests that each of these things carries tremendous importance.

First, Jesus repeats his speech about going away. This time he adds the detail that he goes to “my Father's house”. There he will prepare a room for each of them to join him. Like so many of his sayings, this one has layers of meaning. He could refer

to an earthly place, a large estate able to accommodate them all. But nothing in the rest of his teaching and actions suggests this as a possibility. He refers, instead, to one of those both/and places, to another unit of space/time, to heaven. When Jesus tells his followers that he expects they understand how to find him, Thomas replies, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" This leads to one of the Mt. Rushmore sayings of Jesus, one so important it must have a place on the shortest of lists of his important teachings.

Jesus says, "I am the Way. I am the truth, I am the life. No one can come to the Father except through me." Madeleine L'Engle may have believed in universal salvation, but on the surface Jesus appears not to offer it. People must somehow try to reach salvation *through him*. This begs the question of what it means to seek God *through Jesus*. Our evangelical brothers and sisters believe it requires a conscious statement of faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Our progressive brothers and sisters do not. As I often say, I am delighted I am not in charge of deciding who gets into heaven. Partly because I honestly am not sure I would let myself enter. Mostly because my understanding of God's purpose is partial and my vision of how God's creation works is cloudy. What I do know is this: Jesus claims that whoever has seen him has seen the Father. Seeing him, knowing him, must therefore be decisive. But what does it mean to "see Jesus"?

It means seeing that the child whose birth we celebrate today is God incarnate, Emmanuel.

It means seeing that God had planned the whole salvation history from before the beginning of time, that God prefigured his appearance through the prophets, that God never gave up on offering us rooms in God's mansion.

It means seeing that Jesus taught challenging, often painful things that nevertheless perfectly fit God's calls for justice throughout time.

It means seeing that Jesus calls each one of us to decide whether to follow him.

It means seeing that “following Jesus” means believing in him as Lord and Savior, *and* striving to make his vision for ministry to all kinds of people reality.

Austin Channing Brown is a black, female preacher who has spoken of her amazement at watching her own daughter instill what she calls “comprehensive faith” in her own children. Her grandchildren must love the whole diverse arc of people. They must stand up for what they understand Jesus tells us is right. They must worship God without inhibitions. “It is a miracle,” she writes in her book, *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*, “to see what you believe take root in your family, often with a depth you never experienced yourself.” A miracle indeed.

Isaiah and Jesus both tell us that God has arranged it such that we can follow Jesus to salvation. On this day, when we celebrate Jesus' birth, let us renew our commitment to do so. Follow Jesus, the Christ child, to ministry and to the Father.