



God is Not Bubble-Wrap! – TouchPoint for April 3, 2019

Isaiah 43:16-21

Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

Grace and peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

“I am about to do a new thing, now it springs forth... I will make rivers in the desert.”

It is a passage of contrasts. Old versus new. Looking back as opposed to looking forward. God as bubble wrap or as a transformer of things. Isaiah conjures up the scene from the Exodus. The mighty act of God as God holds back the water to allow the Israelites to walk through the Red Sea and then unleashes it to cause the death and destruction of the Egyptians.

The scene sends one back to the beginning of creation. Where the chaos of the deep, the chaos of the waters is pushed back and dry land and all the inhabitants of the earth are allowed to live. God holding back, putting a wall up between us and the chaos of the world.

It is, I dare say, how we normally think of God. As a protective bubble that holds back the chaos of the world. God primarily as protector of us. ***God as bubble wrap.***

“Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” God the protector. Holding the chaos of the world at bay. And in addition, if God can be the destroyer of my enemies with that chaos, even better. It’s kind of a two-for-one-deal.

But Isaiah tells us to forget that. The Mystery is not going to work in that way anymore. It isn’t about holding back the chaos and desolation of the world, but transforming it. And that is good news. Because we all have chaos in our lives. No one gets out of this life without scars or walking with a limp. Chaos and desolation will come to us whether we like it or not.

And if our primary image of the Mystery is simply as protector, then when chaos befalls us our first reaction is to wonder *“Why me? What did I do wrong? Why doesn’t God love me enough to protect me?”*

“Why, if you just pray hard enough God will rescue you.” Because, let’s face it, I’d much rather be rescued than transformed, changed. The idea of God as a giant bubble wrap around our lives is not only unrealistic, but unhealthy, even as it remains a strong pull. And so Isaiah speaks a new word, a new vision, a new working of the Mystery in the world.

***“Thus says the Lord... I am about to do a new thing ...
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert...”***

This isn't about protection but transformation. This isn't about a God who stands outside and above it all, building walls and a bubble for us; but one intimately connected to the human condition and its workings.

Making a way in the ocean is a holding back of the chaos; making a way in the desert, causing rivers in the desert, is creating life out of parchedness and desolation. It's a whole new direction. It's a new way of thinking. The Mystery is doing something new. God isn't just holding back the chaos of the world; the Mystery is creating something *new out of it*.

Somewhere between chaos and desolation God creates something new. It's like Jesus on the cross in the middle of two thieves. Chaos on his left and desolation on his right. And the Father doesn't create a bubble wrap around Jesus, but plants him right in the middle of it. And there, in the midst of it all, something new is created. Something is being transformed. New life is emerging.

Is this what those who suffer from addiction mean when they say they have found life in the middle of their addiction, not from their addiction? Is this what those who have suffered serious illness or trauma mean when they say they have not been healed from their disease or trauma but through them?

If God is only capable of protection, of creating a bubble for us, then what hope is there when chaos befalls us? You see, at some point in every life, we're going to come to a point where we run up against the realization that we are not the subject and our activity is not the verb, and life is not the object.

At some point in our lives, we are going to come up against the realization that life is the subject, life's activity is the verb and we are the object. And some of that life activity is chaos, and we are simply the object of it. And if the only God we have is one that can only hold back the chaos, then there is nothing left but despair when chaos hits. And we will be left feeling isolated and alone, with the feeling of a God who has failed us.

But if the divine Mystery is one who creates out of chaos; who brings life out of desolation; who can bring springs and living water to the deserts of life, then those times of chaos and desolation become birthing pangs and places of new creation

Look, I'm not a gardener and I've never played one on TV. But I have friends and family who are gardeners, not TV actors. And they tell me that the only ground that can grow seeds, that can bring about new life and new creation, is ground that has been plowed, ground that has been tilled, ground that has been **BROKEN**.

Maybe that is why in my life, those who I know who have a peace which passes my understanding are those I know who have gone through a pain which passes my understanding. And yes, I admire the peace that they have, but I'm not really sure I want to go through what they have gone through to get there. Because you see, I'd much rather be rescued than transformed. But my hope is not in being rescued, but being transformed.

If all God is—is a God of walls and protections, then what a sad God we have. I just came back from Israel and Jordan, the so-called “Holy Land.” And let me tell you what I saw there. Walls—lots and lots of walls. Walls to keep people out. Walls to keep people in. Walls for wailing and praying for a bygone era of glory and power. People carrying Uzis to protect those walls and rockets and bullets being fired from both directions over those walls. Walls built in the name of god, different walls built to honor different gods. And yet, not once, did I feel a sense of peace within those walls. They were simply a monument to the chaos that existed outside of them and within them, and the sense of despair that nothing new could be created. If that is Holy Land, give me un-holy land any day, and I can understand why Jesus spent most of his time in Gentile territory.

If all our faith and religious life is about building walls between us and the chaos of the world, it is a pathetic faith indeed. If the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being is incapable of transformation of the chaos and desolation of our lives then what good is it to follow in the footsteps of him who we say was the incarnation of that Mystery?!

The problem in our world is not that we don't have enough walls or that our walls are not big enough. It's that we don't believe the Mystery is capable of transforming the chaos and desolation of the world. And so it is left to the Mystery to simply break down the walls itself. To transform chaos to peace, to transform hatred to forgiveness, to transform death to life. This is the story of crucifixion and resurrection. To do something new. To take the desolation and deserts of our lives and have that very desolation and desert become the ground of new life and new creation.

This is what Paul is speaking when he talks of the Christ breaking down the dividing walls of hostility. This is what Paul is speaking when he writes of universal restoration. The Mystery isn't about walling off and separating life, but transforming it and uniting it. As we have talked about before, the essence of the divine Mystery is not the separation of good and bad, but the transformation and uniting of all things. The healing of all things.

Look at this meal. In the chaos and desolation of denial and betrayal, in the chaos and desolation of separation and dis-memberment, in the chaos and desolation of fear and doubt, Jesus takes bread and wine and transforms it into a place of healing and reconciliation; a place of re-membering and connection; a place of certainty of presence and forgiveness.

When I talk about this meal, I often say it is where "broken meets broken." I could just as well say, I guess, "Where healing meets healing." Because it is in the brokenness of our lives, the plowed and tilled soil of our lives where the seeds of new life get planted and healing begins.

"See I am doing a new thing—with the chaos and desolation of your lives."

Amen.