

Proclamation of Resurrection in the Old Testament

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Easter is the extreme case of God's sovereign action. The resurrection of Jesus must not be trivialized around a biological question of resuscitation of a dead body, nor around questions of curiosity about immortality or life after death. That Jesus is risen is not a statement about heaven, but about the transformation of earth.

I

The theological assertion the church has found in the resurrection of Jesus is that here God has powerfully asserted a new governance over the toughest region of creation, namely death. Read through a theological prism, the course of world history is the arena through which God gains authority over creation, some parts of which are readily accessible and compliant to God's rule, and other parts of which are haughty, resistant, recalcitrant, and not easily accessible.¹ Where Yahweh's power is not effective, the power of evil-chaos-injustice-oppression-despair-death (all of which are synonyms) has its way. But when God's rule is asserted, that part of creation is transformed into good (Gen. 1:31), order (Is. 45:18-19), justice (Ps. 99:4), freedom (Lev. 25:42), hope (Lam. 3:21-24), life (Ps. 23:2). The theological claim is that a new rule has been established, that Yahweh governs now as Yahweh did not before. God's sovereign domain is not once-for-all given, but it is in process and God is through history gaining dominance even in regions not immediately attainable. The actual experience of that new governance is the prospect, gift, and possibility of human life in the world as God has willed it. The news that is to be asserted in evangelical preaching is that the world situation, that is, the condition of creation, has been transformed by the effective power of God which is the only power for life. Theologically, the resurrection of Jesus is the extreme case against the last recalcitrant region (I Cor. 15:26), but God's governance of death is not different from what God has been dealing with in all seasons of God's life with the world.

Schmid has helpfully asserted that justification by grace, creation *ex nihilo*, and resurrection of the dead are synonymous theological assertions of the powerful action of the creator governing the world and bringing the world to its full life (cf. Rom. 4:17).² That three-fold parallelism opens enormous possibilities for preaching. Such an understanding of the resurrection requires at the beginning a criticism of our cultural habit of reading the resurrection as

a magical individualistic act of resuscitation, and instead seeing that event (as the Bible surely does), as a show of God's massive power. Or as Schmid says, it is the establishment of God's magisterium (*Herrschaft*) over the whole world. Preaching from this faith then engages with the other would-be governances of the world which are in this event nullified.

II

We may identify three paradigmatic assertions in the Old Testament of extreme cases of God's sovereign action against recalcitrant creation. The preaching task is to communicate the ways in which these same theological issues are still the decisive ones for us. Such preaching of course must challenge the benign trivialization through which modernity perceives life, to see (a) that *sovereignty* is still the decisive question of human existence, (b) that *conflict* is still alive between rivals, and (c) that *transformation* happens when this sovereign displaces other claimants to power and authority.

The first paradigmatic assertion is that God has wrought creation out of chaos (Gen. 1:2) and that that change has been done by Yahweh's powerful sovereign word (Ps. 33:6-17). The world pre-Yahweh, pre-creation, pre-sovereign speech is dark, formless, void, without power, without shape, without meaning, without a significance (Gen. 1:2). Yahweh's sovereign speech calls that chaos to shape up. Creation responds promptly, willingly, gladly. Indeed the world is celebrative and delighted when Yahweh finally takes charge, permitting the world to be what it must be and what the world has hoped to be (cf. Ps. 96:11-12, 98:7-8). Now creation can get on with its business of fruitfulness, abundance, and prosperity (cf. Hos. 2:21-23, Ezek. 34:25-27).

The claim the Bible makes about creation must not be presented as an explanation of the origin of the world. Rather that claim, as asserted in Gen. 1 and II Isaiah, is a liturgic assertion that has experiential immediacy for concrete situations of chaos. Critical consensus is that the text of Gen. 1 reflects the sixth century exile which seemed like a shapeless, hopeless context. The priestly liturgy of Gen. 1 wants to assert that this exilic context is one in which Yahweh rules by a powerful decree, "Let there be light." Therefore, even that context is not without power, hope and possibility.

Every pastor deals with folk for whom life is experienced as chaos, in terms of personal concerns and family problems. And public affairs in our time are often discerned to be chaotic. There seems to be no reliable power to count on, no constant shape and no overriding meaning. Life is indeed chaotic. Preaching in such a context requires the assertion that what appears to be chaotic is precisely an arena in which God's powerful purpose for life is being worked out. If one reads from the "good" of Gen. 1:31 to the "good" of Gen. 50:20,³ what the powers of darkness intend for evil is a way in which God intends and implements good. That is what creation faith asserts. This assertion has immediacy and pertinence for people in the midst of chaos.

III

The second paradigmatic event is the Exodus. Here the problem is not chaos but oppression. Nobody accused the Egyptian government of being chaotic (just as nobody accuses the South African government of fomenting disorder). If anything, the Egyptian empire was too tightly ordered, so tightly ordered that persons were discounted in the flow of imperial power, in the rush of imperial programs, and in the harshness of brick quotas. The liturgic enterprise of Ex. 1-15 is at pains to characterize fully the harshness and hopelessness of the situation (Ex. 1, 5). The middle narrative of the plagues in Ex. 5-10 dramatically presents the conflict of Pharaoh versus Yahweh, of life versus death, of oppression versus liberation.⁴ The conflict is long and tense. In its dramatic portrayal, that conflicted question could finally go either way, toward oppression or liberation, toward death or life.

But of course the liturgic drama does not leave the issue unresolved. The liturgic outcome in the narrative of Ex. 14 and in the lyrical poem of Ex. 15 asserts and celebrates that Yahweh, the God of justice and liberation, has won. There may be dancing, singing, and living, because the power for justice and liberation will not be co-opted by the forces of injustice.

The preaching task at Easter is to show how this paradigmatic event (happily celebrated in Passover at Easter time) is pertinent to and being acted out in our own lives. The issues of justice and liberation are so incredibly visible and urgent among us. One senses the awesome power of justice and liberation on the move in South Africa and Poland. Those events need theological, liturgic articulation. But this paradigm draws closer to home. People in rat-race jobs know about relentless brick quotas. Persons in distorted family situations know about oppression, injustice, and the hopelessness of it all. The evangelical news is that every such situation stands under judgment, but also under transformative possibility, because even there Yahweh's new governance can matter in decisive ways. Those who groan under the burden (Ex. 2:23-25) may dance with Miriam in new life (Ex. 15:21).⁵ Preaching is the dramatic invitation to embrace that new reality.

IV

The third paradigmatic event is the homecoming from Babylonian exile in the sixth century. That this is portrayed as a resurrection event is precisely stated in Ezek. 37:1-14, so that this connection is explicit. But it is in the poetry of Is. 40-55 that the transformative gospel of the end of exile is asserted. The poetry of Is. 40-55 utilizes both paradigms already suggested, that of creation out of chaos, and liberation out of slavery.⁶ Indeed in this poetry we are offered a powerful convergence of most of Israel's theological traditions, all of which bespeak the gospel. The word "gospel" here for the first time is used with theological intentionality by II Isaiah (Is. 40:9, 52:7). The news is that Yahweh's sovereign power permits the alienated, displaced ones to go home.

The "world of death" is here a situation in which the power of Babylonian

governance and Babylonian gods seem absolute and beyond challenge. The sense of displacement, despair and alienation is articulated with powerful pathos in the book of Lamentations and in such Psalms as 137. "Exile" means to be in a place where one's dreams are mocked, one's convictions devalued, and one must live without a sense of belonging.

The news rendered by this poetry is that Yahweh, who is like a man of war (cf. Ex. 15:1, Is. 40:10) and like a gentle nursemaid (Is. 40:11), has moved powerfully against Babylon, and has reestablished the rule of covenant which seemed defeated by the realities of the exile (Is. 42:6, 49:8, 54:10, 55:3). That new assertion of governance happens through the historical agent, Cyrus. It leads to the dethronement of Babylonian gods (46), the delegitimation of Babylonian power (47), the lyrical offer of a new song (42:10), and finally to homecoming (43:3-7). The displaced Jews are going home. There they will be safe and honored, no longer mocked or devalued. The situation is decisively changed when Yahweh's rule is asserted.

The sense of displacement and the yearning for homecoming is not remote from people in our context. The displacement happens because of a variety of cultural changes of revolutionary proportion which mean we are no longer "at home." Berger suggests that modernity makes us "homeless," without a center for belonging, so that we are endlessly alienated, exhausted, and fatigued. The news is that the power of alienation is robbed of its authority (cf. Eph. 2:14).

Faithful people are invited to home-building in the midst of the alienation.⁸ There can be home-building in the midst of alienation because Yahweh rules over this seeming exile which is no longer exile. The very place of alienation when ruled by God becomes our home. This is what it means to find "grace in the wilderness" (Jer. 31:2).

These three paradigms amount to the assertion of life in the face of death: ordered creation in place of chaos, liberation and justice instead of oppression, homecoming in the place of exile. The power of the Bible which permits powerful preaching is that its central conviction lives very close to human experience, because every person knows about chaos, oppression, and exile. Every person waits for order, liberation and homecoming. Easter is the occasion when the Church celebrates "the extreme case," but that case of Jesus occurs in the midst of other cases that are not dissimilar.

V

Creation, Exodus, Homecoming are the substantive material of resurrection faith. We may also give brief attention to the modes of assertion of this transformative governance of God. It will not do to assert this transformation in language that is flat and descriptive, for that is inadequate and not fully convincing.⁹ The modes of articulation are important for Easter preaching.

1. The transformative victory of God's governance consists first of all in *doxologies of sovereignty* which are liturgical songs flung in the face of ostensible reality. One cannot argue with the deathly reality of the world on its own terms, but must change the terms of the debate. For example, one cannot

bring life from quoting statistics about the relative weaponry strength of the US and the USSR, but one must speak in a different mode so that life can be experienced differently. Easter faith is first of all sung faith and Easter preaching must be very close to lyrical. The preacher then need not (and indeed must not) engage with the "reasonableness" of modernity, but stands at a different place and speaks from a different conviction.

Thus the great assertions of the Bible are doxologies which include the great enthronement Psalms (Ps. 96-99), the lyrical liturgy of Gen. 1, the celebration of Moses' song (Ex. 15:1-18), and the celebration of Cyrus (Is. 45:1-7). It is singing that is thrown in the face of would-be rivals. The lyric, therefore, turns out to be polemical. The doxology not only sings Yahweh to the throne, but it sings chaos-Pharaoh-Babylon out of power. Such singing mocks and finally dismisses all the phoney claims to power (cf. I Cor. 15:55).

2. A second mode of the transformative Easter power of Yahweh is presented in *narratives of inversion*. These are stories in which the plot of the narrative is a transformation of circumstance or persons, so that what was trouble at the beginning is resolution at the end.¹⁰ Perhaps the most obvious and normative narrative is that of the Exodus (Ex. 14) which forms a counterpart to the doxological song in chapter 15. At the beginning of the narrative Israel must still face the oppressive power of Pharaoh (vv. 5-9). But at the end of the account (vv.30-31), Egypt is dead and Israel lives in faith and freedom. The narrative mode is crucial because only the story form can present the strange, unexpected inversion that is logically inexplicable. Easter faith does not explain, but only testifies and narrates.¹¹

This thrust of narrative can be played out in various forms. It is the structure of many of Jesus' "miracles" which are also Easter narratives. Thus the themes include hungry-fed, blind-sight, lost-found, dead-alive. Moreover the compelling power of the narrative mode is that the hearer in subsequent time not only listens to an old account of inversion, but participates in the present enactment of the story. The power of such preaching is to include the listening congregation in the happening of the story as it is told and heard one more time with astonishment that outruns explanation. All of these narratives (including the resurrection stories of the New Testament) are not told simply as historical record, but that the listening community may appropriate the inversion as also operative in its own life. Thus at Passover time, the Exodus story is retold each year as a present enactment of liberation. The Easter preacher is not to tell an old story as a recollection, but to let it be a present dramatic reality in the life of the congregation. That is how "the old, old story" becomes "the new, new song."

3. Derivative from these two modes of *doxologies of sovereignty* and *narratives of inversion* we may suggest a third mode in which to speak about Easter. Easter faith is not immediately pertinent if it stays only with cosmic or grand public events. Israel also found it possible to identify the same assertion of God's life-giving governances in personal accounts of transformation in songs of thanksgiving, in *personal witnesses of amazed gratitude*. These songs are the voice of individual persons who are not grand public figures but who in quite personal, daily ways have found that the move from chaos to order, from

oppression to freedom, from alienation to at-homeness, from death to life has happened in their own experience.¹² Ps. 30 is a marvelous example of this personal appropriation and practice of the public claim of Easter faith:

I cried to thee for help,
and thou hast healed me.
O Lord, thou hast brought up my soul from Sheol,
restored me to life from among those
gone down to the pit.¹³
. . .Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing;
Thou hast loosed my sackcloth
and girded me with gladness. . .(Ps. 30:2-3, 11).

No explanation is given. This is only narrative testimony of a quite personal kind, the kind anyone might make when the gift of life wells up in our midst. But such occasions do happen. And when they happen, they must be told (cf. Ps. 22:22). The power of God toward life is known in concrete, specific ways. Yet when persons are ready to speak about personal interventions from God, characteristically they use the language and speech forms of the great public paradigm of the Exodus. While our tendency is to fashion language out of private experience, Biblical faith begins with public speech that is then appropriate for personal experiences. Verbs like "heal" and "brought up" are language that in Israel derives from the Exodus memory (cf. Ex. 15:26). This aspect of testimony permits the preacher to identify the turn toward life that happens in all kinds of ways for those who have faith to see and tongues to tell. It is from people who know the Exodus story is still operative in their lives (Deut. 26:5-9) that the Bible has come. And from such people comes the current testimony that keeps faith credible, even midst modernity.

VI

I conclude with four comments:

1. The challenge of Easter preaching is a substantive theological one. The preacher and the congregation must be clear that God's governance is being asserted. Where that rule is asserted, new life is given in transformative ways. The resurrection is a claim that counters the hopeless, reduced life around us where God's rule is neither expected, discerned, nor celebrated. A substantive decision is required of us, for modernity has eroded even our readiness to hold to this miraculous scandal. Unless we are clear about this claim, there can be no empowering preaching of this act of God.

2. When that substantive decision is made (and always made again), the problem is to find a universe of discourse that does not concede too much. How shall we speak of this reality which our world cannot tolerate? The ways in which the Bible speaks are alien to our flattened modes of technical reason and to our culturally distorted notions of how life is given. The modes of doxologies of sovereignty, narratives of inversion, and personal witnesses of amazed gratitude are Israel's preferred ways. None of these modes squares with technical epistemology which is incapable of doxology, which does not believe

in inversions, and which refuses to be amazed. But these matters of life and faith cannot be expressed in the tongues of modernity, for it is this very epistemology that has consigned us to death and despair.

3. All three modes which speak this strange speech are powerfully subversive. Easter faith not only testifies to God's new sovereignty. Conversely it also dethrones, delegitimizes, and dismisses old sovereignties that are now discredited and defeated. Easter means the dismissal of Pharaoh, Caesar, and all imperial power. Easter means the dismantling of all the pathologies by which we order personal, family, and public life. This preaching will soon bring preacher and congregation into conflict with entrenched pseudo-authority. Thus Elijah's raising of the boy (I Kings 17:8-16) is a prelude to confrontation with King Ahab (I Kings 18:17-19, 21:20-24) who does not want the power of God unleashed in his controlled, drought-stricken world.

4. Easter occasions are not isolated events that happen in a vacuum. Easter occasions are beginnings of new processes that endure and have futures. They are occasions when power is unleashed that continues to permit and summon us to life. Thus in Gen. 1, the creation event not only permitted the world, but gave humanity an ongoing vocation (v. 28). Thus in Ex. 1-15, the liberation from slavery not only let Israel be, but urged Israel to Sinai to receive the Torah and embrace a new obedience. So also the resurrection of Jesus has permitted and summoned the church to a new mission. New life is never just an isolated momentary event. New life becomes a force and energy that stays active against the resilient power of death.

The theme of Easter preaching has peculiar urgency in our context. I believe that Easter preaching about the transformative power for life given in the sovereignty of God is now a matter of critical importance among us. Our culture in its dominant values has embraced the power of death in so many destructive ways. This strong power of death will shrivel our humanness as it has already begun to do. I propose that it is precisely the tongues of serious evangelical preachers (by which I mean voices of the gospel) which can counter this sickness to death (Rom. 10:14-17). Easter preaching is not some magical, spiritual consolation, but it is engagement with the rulers of this age. Everything depends on this sovereignty being brought to new speech (Is. 52:7).

In his answer to John's need for Christological clarity, Jesus gives a series of Easter evidences:

The blind receive their sight,
the lame walk,
lepers are cleansed,
the deaf hear,
the dead are raised up,
the poor have good news preached to them (Luke 7:22).

These are all of a piece. They concern human reality. They are an affront to our closed worlds (cf. v. 23). But nevertheless they are true and waiting to be discerned, spoken, embraced and practiced. Such preaching leads to dangerous discipleship which enacts the power of transformation. Amos Wilder comments on the power of resurrection:

It was not a question of Jesus' deliverance from death as a separate miracle but of the advent of the promised kingdom of God.¹⁴

The kingdom for which we pray in the Lord's Prayer can become visible in Easter preaching which asserts that the prayer has been answered. The Kingdom is on the move, and is coming soon!

NOTES

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3, 3 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), pp. 289-95, has most powerfully articulated this region not yet responsive to God, which he characterizes as "this stubborn element and alien factor."

² Hans Heinrich Schmid, "Rechtfertigung als Schöpfungsgeschehen," *Rechtfertigung*, Festschrift für Ernst Käsemann, ed. J. Friedrich, Wolfgang Pöhlmann, and Peter Stuhlmacher (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1976), p. 403.

³ On this envelope of "good," see Bruce Dahlberg, "On Recognizing the Unity of Genesis," *Theology Digest* 24 (1976): 360-67.

⁴ On the revolutionary impetus of this narrative, see Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

⁵ On the song of Miriam and the related corpus, see Gail O'Day, "Singing Woman's Song: A Hermeneutic of Liberation," *CTM* 12 (1985): 263-10.

⁶ On the use of the tradition in II Isaiah, see Bernhard W. Anderson, "Exodus Typology in Second Isaiah," *Israel's Prophetic Heritage*, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson and Walter Harrelson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 177-95, and "Exodus and Covenant in Second Isaiah and Prophetic Tradition," *Magnalia Dei The Mighty Acts of God*, ed. Frank Moore Cross, Werner E. Lemke, and Patrick D. Miller, Jr. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1976), pp. 339-60.

⁷ Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger, Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind* (New York: Random House, 1973).

⁸ See Teilhard de Chardin, *Building the Earth* (Wilkes-Barre, Pa.: Dimensen Books, 1965).

⁹ On the cruciality of language for the church's reception of this faith, see Amos Wilder, *Theopoetic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976).

¹⁰ On this structure of narrative see the study of Robert C. Culley, *Studies in the Structure of Hebrew Narrative* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), and the numerous examples he cites. This structure of inversion is what Dan Via, *Kerygma and Comedy in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), means by the "comic" structure of the gospel.

¹¹ This peculiar mode of articulation is related to what Richard D. Niebuhr, *Resurrection and Historical Reason* (New York: Scribner, 1957), means by "historical reason." One can argue that the resurrection narratives are the quintessential historical narratives.

¹² Rainer Albertz, *Persönliche Frömmigkeit und offizielle Religion* (Calwer Theologische Monographien 9: Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1978), has fully characterized this more personal, intimate faith that lived alongside the religion of the great cult.

¹³ On the metaphor of the "Pit" in the Psalms, see Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, Minn.: Saint Mary's Press, 1982), 41-44.

¹⁴ Wilder, *op. cit.*, 95.