

Faith is forever new

Roger Karban | Mar. 16, 2013 Spiritual Reflections

Our sacred Scriptures contain many stories about how God dealt with people thousands of years ago. Even before I actually picked up a real Bible, I learned about some of these awesome feats in Bible history class. Yahweh delivered the Israelites from a catastrophic flood, led them through the Red Sea "dry-shod," even stopped the sun's course so they could win battles. Someone would be out of his or her mind not to follow a God who regularly staged such dramatic events.



But there was just one problem: I hadn't noticed God doing anything like that during my lifetime, or even in recent history. It seemed as though God had been on a 2,000-year-long vacation. The days of God's awesome actions were all past history, so long ago that no one even had photographs or movies of them.

Fifth Sunday of Lent
Psalm 126
Philippians 1:12-14
2,500 years ago

I began to study Scripture itself did I discover that the people to whom Deutero-Isaiah prophesied 2,500 years ago shared my problem.

This unnamed prophet -- responsible for Chapters 40-55 of the Book of Isaiah -- was the conscience of his people during Israel's most trying biblical period: the Babylonian Exile. King Nebuchadnezzar, after destroying Jerusalem and its temple in 586 B.C., forcibly relocated a large number of Jews to Babylon.

During the exile's darkest days, Deutero-Isaiah brought a ray of hope to people who years before had given up any hope of ever returning to the Promised Land. The prophet reasoned Yahweh's best days weren't in the past. The same God who freed the Israelites from Egypt could also free them from Babylon.

One of the literary devices Deutero-Isaiah employed to convey his belief was the use of participles, verb forms that don't end but prolong the action they describe. A literal translation, for instance, of the first part of today's passage would read, "Thus says Yahweh, opening a way in the sea and a path in the mighty waters, leading out chariots and horsemen ..." What Yahweh did, Yahweh continues to do.

Even exiled Israelites could recite by heart the story of the Red Sea dividing, permitting their ancestors to cross from slavery into freedom. But somehow they never conceived of Yahweh continuing such freeing actions in

their own day and age.

Though Deutero-Isaiah is convinced there's going to be a new Exodus, he's also certain God never replicates past actions in their original format. That's why the next lines of today's reading are so significant. "Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; see, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

Who could ever have imagined that Deutero-Isaiah's new Moses would eventually be Cyrus, the uncircumcised pagan emperor of Persia?

Reinforcing Deutero-Isaiah's message, Paul is convinced only those Jews who believe in the newness of God's actions will experience God's salvation coming through Jesus of Nazareth. In today's Philippians pericope, he uses himself as an example of someone who had to make the leap from the past to the present to appreciate what God was accomplishing through this Galilean carpenter.

In some sense, the "loss" the apostle laments isn't the loss of a physical possession, but the loss of a particular mindset. What he discarded was the belief that just by knowing and keeping 613 laws God would save him. Leaving those laws in the background, he now concentrates on knowing Jesus and "the power of his resurrection."

The key element in this passage is his belief that such knowing isn't something achieved once, then shuffled into faith's storage closet. Christian faith is an ongoing, ever new process. "It is not that I have already taken hold of it or have already attained perfect maturity, but I continue my pursuit in hope that I may possess it, since I have indeed been taken possession of by Christ Jesus."

Could it be that many young people aren't turned on by our faith today simply because a lot of it revolves around preserving the past? Such faith contradicts biblical faith. Our sacred authors are engaged in a constant journey of discovery.

Perhaps, after reflecting on these three readings, we Catholics should especially be alert to what newness the risen Jesus will be bringing into our faith lives during the next few days.

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