

Saving Space
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A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Isaiah 40:1-5; 52:7-10

Years ago, I bought a book by Mary Donovan Turner about the images of God in the Old Testament. The book offered dozens of short vignettes that detailed names and imagery of God, some familiar, some not. One of those vignettes has had a profound impact of my understanding of God. Donovan Turner writes that God is our space. And I'd read you the exact description, but I love this book so much I've given all my copies away. So I'll paraphrase.

Imagine the people of Israel in the Exodus story. Enslaved, abused, held captive in every sense of the word, they finally escape the hand of Pharaoh. A few days into their flight, they begin to feel the anxiousness that accompanies their monumental change: freedom is terrifying in every sense of the word. What's next? How will we know what to do, and where to go? And these freedom-seekers are tired. They've got everything they own on their backs not to mention a few spoils from the Egyptians. And they walk long, long miles during hot, hot days. Old and young alike, make a treacherous journey, stopping only for hastily-made campfire dinners, and a few winks of sleep. And they haven't even had time to process the depth of this decision, when all of the sudden, Pharaoh commands his army to give chase.

And pretty soon, Israel finds itself in an impossible situation. Their future is right here. Right here within reach. A new land. A new story. All of God's possibilities waiting for them. But there's no space. Not one inch.

The people are flanked by Pharaoh's army on one side, and the Red Sea on the other. And they cannot claim their future, because they have neither the ability to cross the narrow sea, nor to defeat a powerful army. But God is their space.

Somehow, someday, God parts the sea – that is God makes space – God gives the people of Israel the space they need to become the people they will be. Freed from the dangers of Pharaoh's army, and freed from the toils of treacherous seas, God's people cross into a new land with new possibilities.

And I believe that the best way to define salvation – that thing that redeems us, or makes us feel whole -- I believe it's to call it space. The miracle of God is that God provides ample space, ample time, ample room for individuals and communities to live into their intended purpose. And that space, and the realization of our purpose, has a profound and transformative effect on the world.

God's mighty acts of space-saving in Exodus were SO impactful on Israel's history that one is hard-pressed to find a psalm or hymn or prayer that doesn't acknowledge the Exodus as paramount to salvation.

And I would argue that the whole of scriptures, are recitations of how God has created space in muddled pasts and muddled presents, to bring forth clear, airy, purpose-filled futures for all creation.

In today's passages from Isaiah, I think we're simply reading another example of what happens when God starts making space for us.

Exiled in Babylon for more than fifty years, the people needed to hear a message of hope. And they hear it in the form of space. In this instance, we're not so much talking about physical space, though we can certainly imagine a holy highway that occupies plenty of space, and Jerusalem, a holy city that occupies an exact place.

I think we're talking more about internal space – that is making room in our hearts to allow God to be at work. In exile, the people felt absent from God. It seems that if there was no Jerusalem, no Zion, then there was no possibility of God being present, and no possibility of a people, land, and covenant, all living in accordance with God:

By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'

How could we sing the LORD's song
in a foreign land?
(Psalm 137)

But God prepares a way back, a return. Valleys are lifted, and mountains are lowered, and the crooked is made straight. The spirit swirls, and breezes, and seeps, and finds space, even in a foreign land. And the future is not sealed off, but rather the people are given a way forward, to meet it, and redeem it, and ultimately live it.

Eventually, Cyrus of Persia allows the people of Israel to return home and build a new temple. And under Nehemiah and others, they do. But does this happen if Israel isn't afforded the space, the time, the room, the grace, the energy to hear the prophet's words in grief and despair?

I think God helped people sing again, and speak again, and listen again. First in small intimate places, maybe just internally. And then God allowed the space for individuals to speak to one another. And then in groups, And to their spouses and children and grandchildren. And hope emerged.

And through the years, the saints have used these same words to create new spaces to make God's future.

Jesus made space at tables, and in conversations, and in social structures. And people found belonging and value and confidence. And in these qualities they have discovered and mapped out a future that isn't beholden to Caesar's wims, nor walled off by social norms, nor restricted to human imagination.

Of course, it's also the 50th anniversary of the moon landing – fitting that we'd talk about space. But maybe in this new age of exploration, God is offering salvation in the form of space travel, something SO bold and SO imaginative that it will force us to move past the limitations of geo-politics, and think of ourselves as one humanity.

And maybe as we point our eyes toward the infinite reaches of outer space, we will be able to be more generous in sharing some of the space we occupy on this planet.

And if we are talking about salvation and space, Sardis Baptist Church, I would offer to you, that for me, this space, this sacred space, here amongst this sacred people, is something that saves me every week. Because, here I find the space to share both my thanksgiving and anxiety; to both praise creation and question its intricacies; and to find room to explore what gifts I and we have, and how those gifts will be used to shape a future full of promise.

Comfort, O Comfort my people; see the feet of the beautiful messenger who brings peace and good news and salvation; sing songs of praise to our Creator, because God is making space, space for me, and for you, and for anyone who desires a future mimicking God's good purpose.

How can you not be excited? I mean really, how can you not? Is there anything more exciting, more full of potential, more full of every statistical probability than a space we have not yet entered, be it right next door, or in another zip code, or even in another galaxy?

God can give you space – from danger, from exile, from grief, from pain, from certainty, from vanity, from heartbreak, from disappointment, from silence, from alienation, from the past, from the present, from anything you can imagine. And that, friends, is our salvation, a salvation that leads us back on straight, level paths to the Zions we are seeking.

Thanks be to God for a saving space.

Amen.