

Isaiah 43:1-14

The 17th Sunday After Pentecost

September 19, 2021

“Westley dies,” my father said.

I said, “What do you mean, ‘Westley dies’? You mean dies?”

My father nodded. “Prince Humperdink kills him.”

‘He’s only faking, though, right?’

My father shook his head, closed the book all the way.

“Aw shit,” I said and I started to cry.

“I’m sorry,” my father said. “I’ll leave you alone,” and he left me.

“Who gets Humperdink?” I screamed after him.

He stopped in the hall. “I don’t understand.”

“Who kills Prince Humperdink? At the end, somebody’s got to get him. Is it Fezzik? Who?”

“Nobody kills him. He lives.”

‘You mean he wins, Daddy? Jesus, what did you read me this thing for?’

*The Princess Bride* is a story within a story. On the inside, it is a story of dashing heroes and nefarious villains, beautiful princesses and Rodents of Unusual Size.

On the outside, framing this story, are Billy, sick with pneumonia, and his father, who reads the story to him every night as he recovers.

Billy knows what makes for a good story: in the end, everybody gets what they deserve.

*The Princess Bride* is a *bad* story.

But then, so is the Bible.

The Book of Isaiah relates the injustice of the rulers of Israel, the indifference of the people, their blindness and deafness to all that God had done for them. And so the people get what they deserve. Israel is conquered by Babylon. Their soldiers are defeated, their king deposed, their walls torn down, their best and brightest sent into Exile in a foreign land.

Fifty years pass.

There are rumours on the wind. News of an invincible warrior, Cyrus of Persia, who sweeps away all opposition before him and is coming to the gates of Babylon. Whereas the Babylonians like to separate and fragment captive nations to keep them weak, Cyrus has a reputation for ruling with a fairly light hand, and allowing self-determination, within limits. When he conquers Babylon, he will send the captive Israelites home to rebuild their nation.

This is God's work, says Isaiah. Although the people have not seen or heard it, God has been at work for their good throughout history. And now it will be so clear that nobody within or outside Israel can deny it: God has called Cyrus, commissioned him and paid him, to free God's people and bring them home.

This is a bad story. Should we rejoice at the bloodshed necessary to send the Israelites home? There is no such thing as a holy war; I'm not sure a good war is a thing either. But this is how God works. This is a bad story, because it's a real story. It's not tidy. God can't force the Israelites to see and listen to what God does for them over the years. God cannot prevent people from fighting wars. But God can invite people to see and to listen to the possibilities inherent in this war. Inherent in Cyrus' conquest is a chance for a new beginning for Israel. That's how the world works. The good and the bad are all sort of caught up together. That's how God works. God doesn't stop to consider whether the people *deserve* to be saved. God doesn't give people what they deserve.

What a bad story.

Speaking of bad stories...the last year and a half of our lives reads like a postapocalyptic thriller. A lethal virus that spreads around the globe; huge clouds of ash and smoke turning the sun a lurid red.

The plot is pretty straightforward. It starts, probably, somewhere in China where a globally connected industrialized food industry brings infected animals into contact with human consumers. International travel and commerce quickly spread the disease around the globe, and a combination of complacency, narrow self-interest and face-saving makes most governments unable or unwilling to act soon enough. The villains.

Our loved ones disappeared into their homes, confined by curfews and mandatory self-isolation. They disappeared into hospitals and nursing homes, behind a curtain of masks and gowns and beeping machines. Some stopped attending church; some moved away; some resigned; some just...changed and grew apart.

Terror and grief and hopelessness.

And hope, and beauty, and determination. Heroes. The mothers and fathers who work and parent and teach all from the dining room table while the schools and offices are closed. My highschool friend, a doctor, who works to save people who proclaim him a fraud and COVID a hoax with their dying breath. The administrators who anger some by not doing enough, others by doing too much, and second-guess themselves every day.

And now, more hope. Vaccination is proceeding. We have the glimmer of hope for normality as we gather again, finally, in the same building. It is a messy

process, a case of two steps forward, one step back. There is joy at seeing familiar faces, and anger and concern over those who will not be vaccinated, who protest and push their way into schools because they are used as vaccination centres.

God is at work in all of this, always drawing us on to the best possible outcome in the messy and imperfect circumstances. Slowly, we are being saved: those of us who obey the restrictions and those of us who are not. That's what strikes me, amid the fear and joy, anger and relief: that God draws all of us on to salvation whether we deserve it or not. I am tempted to think I know better, that I can decide who deserves to be saved and who does not. I hope God can help me fill my heart with joy, and not resentment. I hope the legacy of this pandemic is a new appreciation for the presence of our loved ones, and not bitter division and resentment over what happened in the past.

God does not give us what we deserve. But God is the storyteller, not us.

Thanks be to God.