

Filipino Moses

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 24 September 2023

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Season of Creation 4A

**Isaiah 43: 1-2, 16-21; Responsive reading: Psalm 8;
Contemporary Reading: *If Moses was Filipino* by Venezia May**

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Some years ago, I took a varied ecumenical group of young people to the Taizé Community's International Gathering in the Philippines. For the first week, we visited communities further north on Luzon island, including indigenous people displaced from their land. We were then billeted with local families in a poor neighbourhood of Quezon City in Metro Manila. I remember vividly how, after a typically wonderfully warm Filipino welcome, the first thing our hosts did was to point out the water marks high up on the walls of local streets: *'that was from the last flood a month ago, they said, 'sadly we are used to that kind of thing'*. The impact of such experiences is powerfully transmitted in our contemporary reading today. It is echoed in so many places across the world, not least among the poor. It asks: *'where is the God of Moses when you need them today?'*

I will come back to some Filipino insights about this, and to the poem *'If Moses was Filipino'*¹ which we heard read earlier. However it is important firstly to recognise that, in the Moses story, as elsewhere in the Bible, God as Creator and God as Liberator are intimately linked. This is reflected in Isaiah chapter 43 which we have also heard. For the prophet is proclaiming *'a new thing'* that God will do: *'a new creation'*, involving both liberation and justice for people, and renewal for all that exists.

Divine salvation is thus holistic, not about humanity alone. Indeed, salvation will come through a reversal of past means of deliverance. In Moses' day, God had turned the sea into dry land to enable the exodus and liberation of the people. Now, stuck not only in a wilderness (*midbar*) but a waterless desert (*yeshimon*), God promises to assist again, but this time by turning dry land into water, into flowing rivers. For this transformation is for all creation, enabling a *'greener'* world in which even the jackal and the ostrich will flourish.

There is a powerful series of intersections in this passage, as we often find in the Bible. For this is part of the proclamation of deliverance to the Babylonian exiles, related in Isaiah chapters 40-55. God had previously used the great king Nebuchadnezzar and his forces to destroy Jerusalem and take the pride of Judah into exile in Babylon in 587 BCE. Now God will use the great king Cyrus and his Persian forces to defeat Babylon and allow the exiles to return. Isaiah chapter 43 verses 16 to 21 are thus a striking example of what is called chiasmus, or narrative reversal.

¹ <https://singaporeunbound.org/blog/2021/7/23/three-poets-on-climate-change>

Firstly, we are reminded that God delivered Israel in the Exodus: as the verse has it, *'remember not the former things'*. Then we are promised that God will deliver Israel in the Return from Exile: as the later verse puts it, *'I am about to do a new thing.'* The message is clear: as God has saved, turning things upside down, in the past, so it will be in the present, and, for those of us coming after Isaiah, so too in the future. For, as Isaiah put it, whether we walk through fire, or swim through floods, let us be comforted and rejoice that God is with us: in Egypt, or Babylon, or in any context of oppression; in the desert or in the sea, or anywhere else in all of Creation. Where is the God of Moses when we need them? The answer is: right here, right now, as it was, and shall always be.

Do we grasp this message for our own times? God is in the midst of us, here and now, as of old, and in the times to come: and not just in the midst of us, as human beings, but in the midst of all Creation; in the movement of the waves as of the stars; in the growth of plants and in the movements of birds and animals. What a difference it would make if we renewed this biblical understanding!

Sadly, human beings have often restricted divine salvation to humanity, or only some human beings. Even some of the greats of modern biblical interpretation have read texts like Isaiah simply with human, and not ecological, eyes. The brilliant 20th century scholar Gerhard von Rad thus affirmed that *'the creation of the world is not to be considered for its own sake, or as of value in itself, but rather it performs only an ancillary role to stimulate faith in the redemption (of human beings).'*²

No wonder even liberal Christianity has struggled to move human spiritual preoccupations beyond thinking about them/ourselves, and our own salvation. Even though a biblical passage like Isaiah 43 affirms the earth as not only God's gift but a place of God's presence and action, in the modern era, the cause of the earth has been left too much to others.

Happily, the best Christian scholarship has moved on. Even back in 1974, against von Rad, Claus Westermann affirmed that biblical creation stories and imagery are not mere background and metaphors for human life, but integral to God's continuing creative work in every moment and aspect of existence.³

Justice and the flourishing of all nature are inextricably bound up in the Hebrew scriptures, and the unrighteousness of human beings results in adverse consequences for the whole of the one order of creation, heaven and earth. Today, some theologians would go much further, seeking an earth-centric reading of the Bible, rather than an human/anthropo-centric interpretation which regards human beings as essential stewards and links between God and all else in creation. Pointing out how, in Genesis chapter 1, almost everything existed before human beings. Thomas Berry put it this way:

*Our best procedure might be to consider that we need not a human answer to an earth problem, but an earth answer to an earth problem. The earth will solve its problems, and possibly our own, if we will let the earth function in its own ways. We need only listen to what the earth is telling us.*⁴

² See further: 'Ecological Hermeneutics and the Interpretation of Biblical Texts Yesterday, Today and Onwards: Critical Reflection and Assessment' by Kivatsi J. Kavusa
https://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1010-99192019000100012

³ Claus Westermann, *Creation* (London: SPCK, 1974), 11.

⁴ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 35.

Such eco-theologians thereby point us to healthier ways of hearing, and acting upon God in the Bible. As the Australian scholar Norman Habel and others of the Earth Bible put it, if we are to grow in faith and responsivity to God alive among us today, we need to affirm some key principles in regard to the Earth. These include Principles of Creation's Intrinsic Value, of Interconnectedness, of Creation's own Voice, of Purpose, Mutual Custodianship, and Resistance to injustice. ⁵

How well then are we going with this renewing of faith and spirituality? Let me share three Filipino related insights which may help us.

Firstly, the poem '*If Moses were Filipino*' encourages us to look more closely at contexts of environmental crisis with renewed theological and spiritual perspectives. This is Marnie's gift, both as a child and later as a mother, imagining herself as first the baby Moses and then as the adult saviour. The eco-poet Venezia May thus plunges us into the realities of those struggling with ecological crisis as a regular feature of life, helping us see and feel its impact, and wrestle with what can bring hope. Our contexts are different. Yet can we empathise? And can we also do our own reflective work of wrestling spiritually?

How and where is God at work amid the floodwaters and the parched dryness of our own lives and situations? What '*new thing*' is God seeking to bring about in, for, and with us, and the wider environment in which we are inextricably bound up? Renewing the sacred stories and inspirations of our own lives and traditions, what does it mean for us to be people of baptism today? As we seek to survive and swim through waters, or the lack of waters, which can destroy or give new life, what choices will we make? Do we trust that God is there in the midst of the groanings of our lives and earth?

Secondly, as we name contextual realities, Filipino spiritual experiences also encourage us to reflect on ways in which our biblical texts are stories of resistance against destructive powers. This also requires some spiritual work. For there are powerful ambiguities in the Hebrew stories of liberation. Insightful African American writers, such as Zora Neale Hurston, have for example identified aspects of the Moses traditions which lead on to the use of Moses as '*a man of oppression*', as one recent scholar calls him. ⁶

Whilst some can therefore see Moses as a great liberator, others see a dictator, imposing a strict monotheistic law on a '*chosen people*', which is then also employed, as a theocratic system, to demean and enslave other peoples. Again, it is vital to pay attention to context. As Lily Fetalsana-Apua observes, in her Filipino Resistance Reading of Joshua 1.1-9, the Moses and Joshua narratives can indeed continue to liberate people and land, in so far as we read them as resistance struggles against oppression and exploitation of the land. ⁷

Filipino history, like that of ancient Israel, is full of colonial and other oppression: for the Babylonians, Persians and Greeks who dominated ancient Israel, think of Spanish and American imperialism in the Philippines. Yet, as Lily Fetalsana-Apua comments:

⁵ The Earth Bible Team, "Guiding Ecojustice Principles," in Reading from the Perspective of Earth, ed. Norman C. Habel (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 39.

⁶ See further on this subject Michael Lackey 'Moses, Man of Oppression: A Twentieth-Century African American Critique of Western Theocracy' in African American Review 43 (no 4) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41328658>

⁷ https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/pubs/9780884143338_OA.pdf

The marginal position of ancient Israel and the Filipino nation in relation to the Christian West is significant in meaning appropriation. Though a marginal society, the Filipino Christian community can be in a position of power compared to another community such as the Muslim community in Mindanao, hence this reading cannot be applied in relation to Christian settlement in Mindanao... Resistance hermeneutics is always contextual.

Resistance hermeneutics is always contextual': this is the heart of Isaiah's reworking of earlier theological narratives and an encouragement to us to do the same. How, with the poet, will we re-imagine the inspiration of Moses and God's work of liberation in our own day? What are the powers which oppress us and our planet today? Where do we see God bringing about '*a new thing*'?

This, thirdly, leads to the invitational question presented by Isaiah and re-presented by the poet: where are the bearers of God's hope and salvation to be found today?

Isaiah assures that, whatever we are facing, God is in our midst. We may however need to open our eyes afresh to where God's voice and action is most at work.

Could it be, as Marnie says in the poem, that the new Moses is actually ourselves? We can of course wait for a new saviour of our people and of the planet, or we can realise the God-given Spirit within us.

Is Moses Filipino? Of course: why not?!

God is always doing '*a new thing*' and the Philippines is nothing but constantly re-creating as well as resilient. That of course is up to Filipinos to work out.

But can we also see it, feel it, enter into it?

Can we, also, swim through the waters which threaten to engulf us, and share in the '*new creation*'?

In the Name of the One who rose through the waters of death to share new life with all, in Jesus' Name. Amen.