

THE SONIC BOOM

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They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. (Isaiah 61:4)

This past week two death notices caught my attention: one recent, and one from a long time ago. The recent news was the passing of Chuck Yeager, who died on Monday at age 97.¹ Yeager was the legendary test pilot who in 1947 became the first person to travel faster than the speed of sound. Just a few years earlier he'd been a fighter ace in World War II, flying P-51 Mustangs against the Nazis. At one point he was shot down and wounded over France. He parachuted to safety, traveled by foot through snowy mountains to reach neutral Spain, and finally made his return to the airbase in England. There, Yeager convinced his superiors to allow him back in the air, and soon after he proceeded to shoot down five German fighters in a single day.

As if Yeager's wartime heroics weren't enough, his greatest achievement was still to come. Even before the end of the war in 1945 it was clear that the days were numbered for propeller-driven, piston engine planes. The jet age had arrived. But how fast could they go? Would it be possible to break the sound barrier? Many believed it couldn't be done; the shockwaves of traveling at such a speed would tear apart any plane. Nevertheless, aeronautical engineers had been trying to solve the problem for years, and by 1947 they had built an experimental plane that was capable of reaching the velocity. The Bell X-1 was a tiny rocket-powered aircraft that would be dropped from the belly of a B29 bomber. They just needed someone to climb into its cockpit and fly it. Once again, Yeager raised his hand, and he flew into history.

Breaking the sound barrier was a stunning accomplishment for everyone involved, but for Yeager himself the moment proved to be a strangely hollow climax. People on the ground certainly heard the sonic boom, but he experienced no such thing. In his memoir he wrote: "*After all the anticipation to achieve this moment, it really was a letdown. There should've been a bump in the road, something to let you know that you had just punched a nice clean hole through the sonic barrier. The unknown was a poke through Jell-O. Later on, I realized this mission had to end in a letdown because the real barrier wasn't in the sky but in our knowledge and experience of supersonic flight.*"

Yeager's letdown brings me back to today's reading from Isaiah. Most biblical scholars recognize that the book of Isaiah, rather than being the product of a single author, actually contains the oracles of a whole school of prophets who shared a theological unity, and spoke over many generations. Three particular periods seem to give shape to the sixty-six chapters of the entire book, each of them hundreds of years before Jesus. First were the years leading up to the Assyrian crisis and Babylonian exile. Then came the years towards the end of the Babylonian exile. Finally came the time after the exiles had returned to Jerusalem.

Today's reading seems to date from the latest of the three periods. The Jews had been released from their fifty-plus year Babylonian captivity and allowed to return to Jerusalem. The idealists among them believed they were emerging from the ordeal as better people. The exile had been God's way of purging their sin, and forging them into a nation capable of fulfilling their divine calling. What they had learned was to trust in God's future no matter how bleak their present appeared. Isaiah taught them that the Word of God was not just an idea, not just ink on a

scroll, but a living, personal power working within history, pressing towards a goal. What is more, Isaiah insisted that God could enlist anyone and any nation into the service of achieving the divine purposes. The Assyrians, the Babylonians, and now the Persians all did what they did because God had raised them up to do it, and could just as easily put them down again.

So the Jews had returned to Jerusalem. God had granted them their greatest dream. The Lord had restored the fortunes of Zion, as we read in today's Psalm (126). But was their *mouth filled with laughter, and their tongue with shouts of joy*? Strangely, no. It was a time of tremendous disillusionment and despair. You see, Isaiah had envisioned the return as a mighty parade of people moving across the desert. *A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way ... And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away (Isaiah 35:8-10)*. But the experience of breaking the barrier between captivity and freedom turned out to be a letdown. They heard no singing, no sonic boom. It was more like a poke through Jell-O – an anticlimactic end to all the years of exile.

The problems were myriad. For one thing, not all the Jews even wanted to leave Babylon. After two or three generations they had actually established roots and made a life for themselves in the alien land. Thus the great parade across the desert was more like a trickle. For those who did make the trek, what they found in Jerusalem was a city in shambles, a Temple in ruins, and squatters – people of the land – who were less than enthusiastic about welcoming back the exiles and their idealistic designs on how to run the place. To make matters worse, the surrounding nations were hostile to the notion of a resurgent Jewish kingdom. So the New Jerusalem was anything but paradise. Everlasting joy was not upon their heads. Sorrow and sighing did not flee away. The disillusionment was such that many people simply lost faith not only in the Jerusalem dream, but in God himself. It was then when the spirit of the Lord God anointed another prophet in the school of Isaiah to bring good news and bind up the brokenhearted. Isaiah reminded the people of God's mission for them: *They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. Build up the ruins and repair the devastations. These are all going to play a role in God's future. Trust in God's future.*

Isaiah's call resounded in ancient times through many decades in different crises. So also it is an urgent Word for us once again. Trust in God's future. You see, we too have lived in exile from the life we used to know. The world has suffered long under the coronavirus, and by all accounts we are looking at a long, dark winter ahead. The virus is surging, the loss of life is mounting, and we all face a return to the restrictions that were upon us last spring. Nevertheless, in the news this week is also the sound of triumph. The age of the vaccine has arrived. The days of the pandemic are numbered. Most certainly we will emerge from exile. The victory of life is won. Understand the significance of the achievement. I have no doubt that a prophet in the school of Isaiah speaking today would hail the arrival of the vaccine with the same laudatory language that welcomed Cyrus of Persia as God's anointed, who came to free the exiles from the grip of the Babylonians.

The questions for us are really much the same as they were for the returning exiles. In what condition will we emerge from our peculiar captivity? Will we come out of the ordeal as better people than we were before? What will we have learned from this time of trial? Already we speak of 2020 with disdain for the difficult year it has been. We want to put it behind us and not look back. But to do so will be to lose sight of any lessons that might serve us well in the future. It's a curious thing how one-hundred years ago, the last time we emerged from a global pandemic, the ordeal seemed to leave no imprint on our collective psyche. People just wanted to put it behind them and forget about it.

I don't want to go so far as to say that our post-pandemic age will be a letdown, but the challenges ahead are staggering in their scope. In addition to ruined cities and a devastated economy, we face what a New York Times opinion piece this week called *The Hidden Fourth Wave of the Pandemic*² – the delayed psychological trauma of isolation. One line in the article says it all: “Once we get the pandemic under control, people are going to come up for air, and they will not be OK.” The new age is not going to be paradise. Neither was it a bed of roses for the returning exiles. Still, Isaiah challenged them to trust in God's future. Look how far you've come. You're here in the New Jerusalem. Now get to work and embrace new day that God has given you. *Build up the ancient ruins. Raise up the former devastations. Repair the ruined cities.* This is the work of God, and according to Isaiah, anyone can join in: not just Israel, not just the church, but the whole disbelieving, disillusioned world.

What does it really mean to trust in God's future? Critics of religion often say that people of faith are typically of such a heavenly mind that they are of no earthly use. In other words, they think that people who trust in God's future merely sit around waiting for God to make it happen. On the contrary, people who truly trust in God's future are so confident in it that they prepare the way of the Lord. They make straight the way of the Lord in the here and now. They get themselves and others ready as a bride and bridegroom get themselves ready for their wedding. John the Baptist, was one such person of confident faith. He preached on the banks of the Jordan River and all Jerusalem went out to him. The Jewish leaders sent priests and Levites to ask him, “Who are you? Are you the prophet?” You sure sound like Isaiah to us. Even though John denied that he was the prophet, he certainly spoke in unity with Isaiah, and pointed directly at Jesus as the embodiment of God's future already in their present: a new day has dawned; the new age has arrived. Interestingly, when Jesus preached in the synagogue at Nazareth, he chose today's reading from Isaiah to describe his vision. So both John and Jesus spoke the Word in the in the Isaiah tradition, and charged us to trust in God's future. What does God's future look like? Imagine this: the oppressed hear good news. The brokenhearted are consoled. The captives are liberated. The prisoners are released. Those who mourn are comforted.

At the beginning of the sermon I mentioned two death notices, the second being one that happened a long time ago. Last Tuesday was the 40th anniversary of John Lennon's murder outside his apartment on the Upper West Side. The date aroused a momentary nostalgic look at his music, and renewed puzzling over what he meant by some of his lyrics. One song of Lennon's often under scrutiny is entitled, simply, *Imagine*. Some have claimed it as an atheist anthem because he asks us to imagine how the world would be a better place with no heaven, no hell, and no religion.³ He goes on and dares us to imagine a world with no countries, no wars, and no possessions. Understandably, song has provoked passionate debate between those who embrace the lyrics and those who reject them. For people of faith, the song seems to imagine a strangely hollow climax at the end of this mortal life: no heaven, the ultimate letdown.

As for me, I've never found the energy to get worked up about what John Lennon either believed or didn't believe. I rather like the idea of heaven, and when I break the barrier between this world and the next I'm hoping for, if not a sonic boom, then at least of choir of angels singing in eight-part renaissance polyphony (nothing too modern, please). As for religion, well, I guess I'm OK with that, too. And I do like my possessions. In fact, I'm planning to ride my bike on this unseasonably warm afternoon – and no, you may not borrow it when I'm done. It's mine.

So would I count myself amongst the haters who reject John Lennon's dreamy idealism? Not really. If you pay attention to what Lennon asks us to imagine, it's not altogether different from the future that Isaiah, and John the Baptist, and Jesus dared us to envision and trust. Imagine, no wars, but swords beaten into ploughshares (Isaiah 2:4). No countries, because we will be

neither Jew nor Greek (Galatians 3:28). No private possessions, because we will have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10). No religion or church, because the Lord God Almighty will be our temple (Revelation 21:22). When we are perfectly restored to the presence of God we won't need any of these things. *Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.* Such is God's future. It is our invitation to trust it, and trust it so much that we make straight the way for it in the here and now, from this time forth, even forever.

They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

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¹ Richard Goldstein, *Chuck Yeager, Test Pilot Who Broke the Sound Barrier, Is Dead at 97*. The New York Times, December 7, 2020.

² By Farhad Manjoo, December 9, 2020.

³ Andrew Bradstock, *Faith and Reason: Is "Imagine" Really Atheist?* Otago Daily Times, December 17, 2010.