

## BE GENERATIONOUS!

Texts on Sunday, November 11, 2012

*Isaiah 43: 15-21; Matthew 6: 24-34*

**V**ery OFTEN, dear friends, have we told here the tale of Israel's sorrow at the breaking of her city walls, the smashing of her temple, the forced marching out to exile of her nobles, her leaders, her men of law and letters, and all their families. Of how in a city far away they despaired of help from their God, how some defected to other gods, how some abandoned hope, and some heard a new song, to whose strains we listened again just now. *Thus says the Lord, Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. For behold, I am doing a new thing. Now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?*

We tell this tale often for two reasons. One, because it's much in the Bible. Isaiah intones it, Jeremiah joins it, Ezekiel's bones bear it, 2 Kings will make you weep for the last day of Israel's last king, who was brought before his captors, who slew his two young sons before his two eyes then scooped them both from their sockets and led him to Babylon with only visions of grief in his solitude. And the Psalms sing it. ♪ *By the rivers of Babylon, where we sat down / And there we wept when remembered Zion.* One reason we tell this story over and again is that it's all over the book.

The other reason we tell this tale digs deeper down. Look, if Israel had succumbed; if Marduk, god of Babylon, had swayed ancient Israel's worship as well as the Mammon, god of America, has swayed ours, there would be no story to tell, no Old Testament, no Jews, but (this is beyond comprehension) a completely different history of the world. If your parent ever told you of a serious sweetheart from before Mom and Dad met and married, and you were made dizzy wondering who would be you had your parent chosen another partner, well!, be the same dizzy for all history, and a thousandfold. Had the Jews of Babylon, in their distress altogether abandoned love of God, we would not be, neither Jew nor Christian. We tell this story because it tells a turning point for all generations.

If you have studied the Older Testament with me, you'll remember its undulating highs and lows, with three exuberant Everest peaks, each with its hero—Abraham, Moses, and David; and three terrible troughs between, each with its sorrow—slavery, disintegration, and exile. But here's the thing. In the trough is where the future comes. In the wrenching aside of best-laid plans. In the heart of darkness. At the bottom of the well all dried up and done, the face of the future upward turns to receive the word. *Behold, I am doing a new thing.* Always here it begins: ∪. Never here: ∩.

This is not news. We preach it often. Still do your hearts rise to the word as to the most unutterably beautiful music. Yet have we made this clear enough, that when by God's word, the turning comes, it comes not to a person, but to a people. In Egypt, slaves became Hebrews, ready to receive Moses. In Canaan, murderous tribes became brothers and sisters, ready to receive a king over all. At the bottom of Babylon, the exiles became the Jews, joined at last with God in a spirit able to overcome all the evils that would be visited upon them for generations. In the pit, a people forms—or fails. And of the failures, we cannot read, for their story failed with them. We tell this tale again and again because it shows how God's new thing comes.

When a people forms at the bottom of the waves, the word that comes to them has this character. *We are being called into being. We are being called. We must be! Israel must be!* And into that glorious surprise of unity come two angels, visiting each man, woman, and child who has ears to hear. One angel binds the heart with love for all these others who are mine, and whose I am. The other angel bids each one affirm, *Whatever I can give I will give for all. Whatever I can give up, I will give up for all. For I am no longer I alone. I am for the generations. I am generous. I am generationous. I will give whatever I can give, for we must become who we are. We must be!*

Here we will insert with strange brevity two thousand years. For the story of Jesus is told along these very lines of high and low. The crucifixion-resurrection of Jesus Christ is this story told for all the world. The turning is in the tomb. There in the darkness, in the emptiness of death, comes the word, *Behold, I am doing a new thing. Do you not perceive it?* And though many saints have been singly drawn up from their soul's dark night by the light of the Cross; far more, far deeper has the word come to people in the pit to form them and to reform them in their communities, so that through all their sinews, stretching every nerve, they say, *We must be.*

Then they stop defending their old, dead ways. They stop disintegrating into groups and grumps. They stop their heartless slicing of one another's little failings. And like ears of corn bursting with fruit in the field—individually yes, but all at once in season—they start to say, *Whatever I can give I will give for all. Whatever I can give up, I will give up for all. For I am no longer I alone. I am the generations. I am generous. I am generationous. I will give whatever I can give, for we must become who we are. We must be!* That is when the word of God comes alive for all to see.

On a September Sunday of 1930, not a full year after the world economy had crashed into the Great Depression, this great edifice was dedicated to the glory of God and God's word in Christ Jesus. Through the munificence of John D. Rockefeller Jr., Riverside was set upon the seas of history with pro-

visions and fuel to keep the ship ship-shape. Yet no man, no matter his money, can send a church of God across the waters of time toward any shore whatever, except the Lord send the ship, except the Lord build the house. Somehow, in each of our generations, few though they be, the people of Riverside have been formed and re-formed at the bottom of the waves.

Do you not think it very, very peculiar that Riverside Church should stand in the eye of this city, of this nation, of this world as a beacon whose light must shine?—that in their eyes we *must* be? And why? Because even in its confusion about God and mammon, even in its worry worry worry after tomorrow and what it shall wear and what new foods to eat, still this world has many who feel that the word of God must come down among the people with liberating power—and *not* come as words of human power and control, shivering down from pulpits and TVs claiming God for the wealthy, God for the wars, God against women, God against poor and ignored—but God of the free Word, the Word within, the Word who reveals Godself in you and declares that you must take your crown, together! You must be!

Now, over a stony road we have recently come, and many have left the path we trod. Compared with a day in memory, our numbers are few. Some stand at a distance, saying to themselves, *If they step right, then I will join the march.* Never mind. Not through them is God calling to the church at the bottom of the waves—but through you. You are the ones who remember the battles we have fought. You remember why the fundamentalists must not win. You were there for Birmingham and Greensboro and Selma. You know why Martin Luther King Jr came many times to this pulpit. Why Nelson Mandela spoke here, and Bishop Tutu. You feel it, why we staked out new territory for the rights and reality of women, of gays and lesbians, of marriage equality, of neighbors to the south needing sanctuary, for South Africa, for a living wage, to stop stop & frisk and wake from the nightmares of mass incarceration, environmental destruction, and global warming. And now, in the whelming floods of the Sandy storm, again we join with a thousand thousand hands in giving aid and succor to those whose lives are overturned in these tides. You know why. Riverside must be!

God knows, we're far from being good at what we're called to be. No defense needed here. We tumble and stumble and flail about. But here's the thing. If we who remain, we few, will hear God's word for these times—*Behold, I am doing a new thing*—and if we will be formed and reformed again as God's people from this place, even at the bottom of the waves; then each of you must come awake to our situation—not as a dreamer; not as a careful layer of plans; not as a budget guardian; nor a pray-er who only wishes and hopes that a good result might come of all our pleading and

planning and dreaming and cutting—No! Come to Riverside as a warrior, determined not upon success, but convicted by the justice of what we do; with eyes fixed not upon the horizon, but on the mystery of God's word appearing upon this people now, made one in Christ, who causes the bitterness on your tongue and harsh words to taste the sweet liquor of love and begin once more to speak the truth the world needs to hear. Riverside must be.

Be like a warrior, ready to give all for the generations. Be generationous. Feel it like the warriors with King Henry in Shakespeare's play, who go ready to give all into the battle on St. Crispin's day, after their leader says:

He that shall live this day and see old age / Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbors/  
And say, Tomorrow is St. Crispian's / Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars /  
And say, These wounds I had on Crispin's day / Old men forget, yet all shall be forgot/  
But he'll remember, with advantages / What feats he did that day. Then shall our  
names / Familiar in his mouth as household words / Be in their flowing cups freshly  
remember'd / This story shall the good man teach his son / And Crispin Crispian shall  
ne'er go by / From this day to the ending of the world / But we in it shall be  
remember'd / We few, we happy few, we band of brothers. / For he today that sheds  
his blood with me / Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile / This day shall gentle his  
condition / And gentlemen in England now abed / Shall think themselves accurs'd they  
were not here / And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speak / That fought with  
us upon St. Crispin's Day. (*King Henry V*, Act IV, Sc. 3)

Friends, if you like not the violence in the metaphor, only give thanks that you are child of a day when we see at last that wars must cease, else all cease. But shunning arms, do not thereby forsake the warrior's passion to be one for all and all for one. For in this sense, Christ himself was first of all warrior, undaunted by death at the wall of state terrorism which he faced. See this, too. What the warrior anciently offers through his body, you in this time must offer with your money. Mostly, you just cannot give your bodies as a sign of your love and your absolute faith that Riverside must be! Yes, your time is priceless, and your talents, your gifts and graces, are needed. But you cannot withhold your money. You cannot serve God *and* wealth. If Riverside must be, you need to signify with a warrior's freedom and a warrior's passion that you are all in. Do not hang back. Make a measure of your bounty, a flowing percentage; offer it freely, and find out how it feels to join the generations and the generous, in receiving God's word here, at the bottom of the well. The time is come for all to say: *Whatever I can give, I will give. Whatever I can give up, I will give up for all. For we are no longer alone. We are for the generations.* Be generous. Be generationous. Give more than you can give, for Riverside must be!

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*The Riverside Church  
in the City of New York*