



# THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – September 28, 2008

Shake the Bag!

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## Isaiah 61:1-4

*1 The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,  
because the LORD has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners;  
2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,  
and the day of vengeance of our God;  
to comfort all who mourn;  
3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion --  
to give them a garland instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.  
They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.  
4 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.*

## Luke 1:46-55

*46 And Mary said,  
"My soul magnifies the Lord,  
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his  
servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.  
50 His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
51 He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.  
54 He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

Fifty years ago, I was blessed with a stroke of singular good fortune. My Aunt Madge was working in Paris for the CIA, and my grandmother was as desperate to visit her daughter as she was terrified of flying on the new-fangled Boeing 707's. Her felicitous solution was to sail from New York to Cherbourg and back on the RMS Queen Mary, with me as the designated travel companion. Pictures of me in my Little Lord Fauntleroy dinner jacket and flannel shorts are still hidden from my brothers because of their catastrophic blackmail potential.

The Cunard White Star Line had little interest in entertaining seven year olds, and so the only multi-generational event of the crossings was Bingo. Now the Queen Mary's version of Bingo was decidedly low-tech - no whirling cage of ping pong balls, no electronic display. Rather, a proper British steward simply stood in the middle of the main lounge with a brown felt bag holding the wooden bingo numbers. An announcer drew out the little bingo balls one by one, revealed the number with a flourish, and placed it on a mahogany tally board.

But, sooner or later, the stately decorum of the game was almost always disturbed by a loud shout from the back of the lounge. There sat the bingo "habitués": mostly ladies who had more or less established permanent residence on the Mary. I thought they must have been the wealthiest persons on the planet, not because they lived on the ship, but because they could somehow afford to play four or five bingo cards in every single game. Whenever one of these Bingo regulars became discontent with their run of luck, they would shout out: "Shake the bag!...Shake the bag!" The steward would give the bag a ritualistic shake to appease their plea for a change of fortune, and the game would go on.

Even a seven year old could tell that whether or not you believed in the justice of "shaking the bag" turned entirely on how full your bingo card was when the cry sounded. The appreciative echoes of "yes, shake the

bag!” always seemed to go up from the people staring down at empty cards, the groans of lament always seemed to go up from the people needing only B-9 to fill their line.

The ancient Israelites to whom the prophet Isaiah spoke in this morning’s Old Testament Lesson were looking down at utterly empty bingo cards. The Israelites had experienced the absolute devastation of conquest by Babylon. Their cities had been sacked, their temple destroyed, and their nation reduced to rubble. Isaiah described them as a people of weak hands, feeble knees and fearful hearts. [Isaiah 35:3-4] After decades of enslavement, their Babylonian captivity was now coming to an end, and the Israelites were facing an exhausting trek home across the burning wilderness to, well, to nothing. Their homes and farms had been destroyed. How often they must have looked to the heavens and cried out in their desperation for God to “shake the bag.”

The people of Galilee for whom Mary sang in this morning’s Gospel lesson from Luke were looking down at the emptiest cards of their time. Israel now groaned under Roman occupiers who squeezed every last tax out of their vassal state.

Even by the standards of a subjugated Israel, the Galileans were the most desperate. Galileans were victimized by absentee owners of estates [cf. Luke 20:9], provided a spawning ground for first-century revolts, [Raymond E. Brown, The Birth of the Messiah at 363.] and then suffered both the brutal reprisals of their furious Roman overlords and the bitter resentment of their countrymen.

And, even by the standards of this despised Galilean hinterland, Mary was uniquely vulnerable. Nazareth was a very, very small village, and even a 14 year old peasant girl would have seen what happened to unwed mothers at close range. As she tossed and turned in her bed pondering her swelling belly, Mary could imagine how her mother’s eyes would widen as Mary choked out her secret, how they would then cloud with concern, how concern would give way to the inevitable questions, and then the doubts, and then the tears of shame, and then the whispered councils among the family elders, and then the rejection by Joseph, and then the shunning, and then the lifetime of begging for alms in the village

shadows. How urgently Mary must have prayed for God to “shake the bag.”

And then, just as Isaiah had prophesied to Israel, and just as Mary had blurted out to her cousin, Elizabeth, that’s just what God prepared to do. In the mud of a squalid livestock pen, in a crude feed box holding a peasant baby, God would well and truly “shake the bag.”

Isaiah’s prophecy anticipated that “shaking the bag” would mean an utter restoration of fortune. God would “bring good news to the oppressed,” “bind up the broken hearted,” “proclaim liberty to the captives;” release to the prisoners; garlands of victory to the defeated and oil of gladness to those who mourn. [Isaiah 35:1-3.]

Mary’s song, her “Magnificat,” foresaw that “shaking the bag” would mean a radical reversal of fortune. God would scatter the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; bring the powerful down from their thrones and lift up the lowly; fill the hungry with good things, and send the rich away empty. [Luke 1:51-53.] Surely, from then on, all generations would call this unwed teenage mother not despised but rather blessed. Blessed!

If Isaiah foresaw that shaking the bag would mean restoration, and if Mary anticipated reversal, theologian Gerd Theissen understood God’s “shaking the bag” in the manger to be nothing less than revolution - what Theissen called a “revolution against evolution.” As Theissen wrote in his book, Biblical Faith: An Evolutionary Approach, today’s readings from Isaiah and Luke announce nothing less profound than that the old kingdom of biological evolution was being transcended by God’s Kingdom of Spiritual Evolution, and that the apparent losers in the old kingdom of survival of the fittest would be the first winners in the new Kingdom of mercy and justice.

A revolution against evolution. Now that’s a pretty heady thought for a rainy Sunday morning, so let me explain, beginning with two preliminary remarks.

First, we’ll need to sidestep the culture wars which suggest we have to choose between Biblical religion on the one hand, and Darwinian evolution on the other. Can’t we agree, just for this morning, that perhaps, just perhaps, the Creator of everything that has ever been or will ever be might have been clever

enough to design evolution as one of his tools for creation?

And, even as we note the different vocabulary of Genesis and Darwin, can't we acknowledge, as Paul Tillich taught in Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality, that science and religion are two very different ways of telling a story, but the ultimate reality they seek to describe is the same?

Second, in suggesting that God's spiritual evolution transcended the limitations of God's biological evolution, Theissen didn't mean to suggest that biological evolution was intrinsically evil. Biological evolution had been a wondrous tool of creation. Life had spread to every corner of the globe and pressed back the powers of chaos and dark. Humans had physically flourished and adapted to life on almost every continent, extending the processes of biological evolution into human cultural evolution as natural selection weeded out flawed or sickened civilizations and replaced them with stronger, more cohesive, more vital empires.

But biological and cultural evolution had reached a dreary plateau. The same values of strength, aggression, territoriality and sexual hunger that biological evolution rewards had shaped a world of conflict, enmity and spiritual suffering. Natural selection pits man against man, tribe against tribe, nation against nation in an endless cycle of violence and competition. Biological evolution raises up peoples with a gift for military and mercantile prowess, but the weaker masses suffer at their hands. And even the victors in the race gain their laurels at a terrible cost. Even the victors, maybe especially the victors, find themselves driven by appetites they can never sate, anxieties they can never calm and conflicts they can never resolve. Biological evolution turns out to be an extraordinary driver of human life, but quite indifferent as to the spiritual gifts that make human life worth living in the first place: spiritual gifts like joy, hope, love and faith.

So God, in God's infinite mercy, in God's infinite love for humanity, in God's infinitely good providence comes among us as the Christ to bless us with the spiritual gifts, to introduce Human Life 2.0. How? By shaking the bag!

Jesus announces that the kingdom of this world, the kingdom which values strength, aggression and acquisitiveness will be transcended by the Kingdom of God which values humble love of God and neighbor. Survival of the fittest rewards which advantage the physically aggressive will be transcended by spiritual rewards for all who turn from the false gods of material riches to the true God of Spiritual riches.

But even as Isaiah's prophecy rings in our ears, even as we're charmed by the tender hope of Mary's Magnificat, even as we turn Theissen's theological perspective over in our minds, we take our place with every one in that old Queen Mary lounge as they heard the cry of "shake the bag!" We take our place wondering whether this shaking of the bag is good news, or more particularly, whether it's good news for us.

Well, I suppose, the answer is, "it depends." It depends first on what your personal bingo card looks like this morning. If like the Israelites, like the Galileans, like Mary, you're looking down at blank spaces where you mourn the loss of a loved one, where you're brokenhearted over the death of a dream, where you're wracked by anxiety over your financial prospects, where you're imprisoned by addictive behaviors, where you're faint of spirit because of familial conflicts or rejection, well then you're looking at just the kind of card that has always made "shaking the bag" good news. These circumstances might have been "set ups" for diminution in a world ruled by natural selection, but Jesus declared them spiritual blessings in the new Kingdom of God.

Haven't you noticed that it's precisely during the times our hearts are broken and our heads bowed that we are most likely to turn to God with utter dependence? Haven't you noticed that it's just during those difficult times that we are finally ready to let go of our feverish grip on the kingdom of success and reach out for the Kingdom of God?

As Loring Chase, a pastor of this church, preached decades ago, "God can't do much with a person who is so pleased and satisfied with his or her own self - for whatever reason - that he or she thinks that a fine reward must surely be on the way. God can do something with a person who for a moment stands empty and unassuming before the divine holiness and offers himself or herself for remaking." As David sang

in Psalm 51; “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit: a broken and contrite heart, God, thou wilt not despise.”

But what about those of us who seem successful, strong and confident this morning? What about those of us whose Bingo card seems to lack only B-9? Is shaking the bag good news for us? Well, it turns out that it still depends. Jesus doesn’t condemn prosperity, respect or security in and of themselves, but he does warn that they bind us with an almost irresistible power to the kingdom of success. [Paul Tillich, “The Paradox of the Beatitudes”, Shaking the Foundations at 27.] If we do settle complacently for the rewards of biological evolution, then we certainly will forfeit our participation in the fruits of God’s spiritual evolution.

But even here, even here God’s grace can disturb our complacency. We may discover that for all our material achievements, there is still something missing in the warp and woof of our lives. Our bingo card may be full of acquisitions, accomplishments and worldly power, but somehow curiously empty of fulfillment, meaning, and peace. As Isaiah warned in chapter 55, we may find we have been “[spending] [our] money for that which is not bread and [our] labor for that which does not satisfy” [Isaiah 55:1-3.] And now, even in our material strength we may recognize our spiritual weakness, and even in our material abundance we may recognize our spiritual need. And even with our material advantages we may still find ourselves praying that God would “shake the bag” in our hearts to upset our complacency. That our souls might magnify the Lord, and that our spirits might rejoice in God our Savior, and that all generations might call us blessed. **Amen.**