

The Possible Dream

Remember the popular and inspirational song from the musical, "Man of La Mancha:" "The Impossible Dream." Our biblical text this morning could take on that same title, or, it could be called "The Possible Dream."

Bible scholars place the origin of the text in the late 8th century, BCE, late in the reign of King Hezekiah of Judah. Times were tough. Assyria was a dominant power to the north; Egypt to the south, and the two were fighting over who would control the crucial commercial routes that ran through the heart of Israel and Judah. Israel already had fallen, and Judah—Jerusalem—was caught in the middle.

Prophets of "doom and gloom" were proclaiming their message. Hezekiah was stressing out. Isaiah's message was that if Judah would clean up its act, there was nothing to worry about. And, even if that didn't happen—even if Judah were to fall to a foreign power (which they did eventually)—God would redeem them.

The text has a vivid sense that God's coming will be deeply transformative. The Bible is relentless in its conviction that nothing crooked or distorted or deathly need remain as is. God's power and God's passion converge to make total newness possible. These messianic promises work against our exhaustion, our despair, and our sense of being victims of fate. Hear the Word that came to Isaiah:

ISAIAH 35:1-10 (NRSV)

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus ²it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.*

*The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the LORD,
the majesty of our God.*

³*Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.*

⁴*Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
"Be strong, do not fear!"*

Here is your God.

*He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.*

He will come and save you."

⁵*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;*

⁶*then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for*

joy.

*For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;*

⁷*the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.*

⁸*A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;*

*the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.*

⁹*No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.*

¹⁰*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.*

This poem resonates with what Walter Brueggemann calls "lyrical abandonment". It is a celebration of the transformation of creation and of human history shaped by the coming of God into a people's life. It's divided into two parts: (a) the

transformation itself (vs. 1-7); (b) a description of the parade that celebrates the transformation (vs. 8-10).

It's best to read the description of transformation in a chiasmic structure:

- (a) the transformation of creation (vs. 1-2)
- (b) the transformation of disabled humanity (vs. 3)
- (c) the announcement of God's coming rescue (vs. 4)
- (b') the transformation of disabled humanity (vs. 5-6a)
- (a') the transformation of creation (vs. 6b-7)

It may be most helpful if we read it from the center; that is, the announcement of God's coming rescue (vs. 4), because everything hangs on this word. Without God's powerful word and presence, both disabled creation and dysfunctional humanity are lost, hopeless, and condemned to deathliness.

God's intention is to save; in order to do that, God will both "recompense" (that is, make reparations and give good gifts) and "avenge" (that is, defeat the powers of death, which Walter Brueggemann defines as "anything that prevents living effectively and joyously.")

The two-fold nature of God's transformation is (1) to work good and (2) to eliminate threat, and the first impact of the announcement concerns disabled humans—those with "weak hands" and "feeble knees" (vs. 3); those with "fearful hearts" (vs. 4)—in short, all those whose lives are overwhelmed by fear, timidity, vulnerability, lack of courage, any deficiency of capacity to live a full life.

When God's coming is announced (vs. 4), the impact on these disabled ones is immediate and dramatic: the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the dumb sing (vs. 5-6a; cf. Luke 7:22)! The failure of human creation is turned upside down. People are given back their lives. Humanity is restored to full function.

But there's more: the impact of God's word on troubled humanity is matched by its impact on troubled creation; in fact, the situation of the two is identical, because they both participate in the same act of creation. Both are in pitiful condition, both desperately yearn for rescue, both are incapable of saving themselves.

The word comes to creation in an arid climate. Creation's woundedness is a massive drought in which all live vegetation suffers. But the rain is promised. God is coming, and the whole of discouraged creation will blossom and flourish, restored to full function (vs 2).

After the word of redemption is uttered there is an exuberant description of renewed creation and renewed humanity emerging and celebrating.

The writings of Isaiah consistently focus on Jerusalem. The City of God represents all of God's activity. It's the place to go. In vs 8-10, Isaiah assumes anyone

who is able will join the procession to Jerusalem on the new road built just for this parade—this celebration of thanksgiving. And, unlike the road to Jericho, where one can get mugged (remember the parable of the Good Samaritan?) this road is completely safe. And the poem closes on the new creation on its way rejoicing.

It's hard to avoid some rather clear parallels between the text's description of disabled creation and dysfunctional humanity and similar realities today.

There's no need to recite the ills that confront us daily, some of which emerge out of our own poor decisions, some of which are completely beyond our control—some of which are very private, some of which are ills of family or community; and some of which are global in scope.

You know where you hurt, whether the pain is physical, emotional or relational. You know the concerns that burden your soul and make you anxious for the future. This passage in Isaiah is for you. It is the jubilant announcement of the way God's grace acts in creation and in human life.

Do you know what it means to be struck by *Grace*? It doesn't mean that we suddenly believe that God exists or that Jesus is the Christ. "Even the devils believe, and tremble", writes James (2:19).

Nor does *Grace* mean we're making progress toward moral self-control. Moral progress may be a result of *Grace*; but it is not *Grace*; in fact, it may even prevent us from receiving *Grace*, because it may lead to pride and self-assurance.

We cannot transform our lives. We can only allow them to be transformed by that stroke of *Grace*. It happens or it doesn't happen. And certainly it doesn't happen if we try to force it upon ourselves. Paul Tillich describes the experience of *Grace*:

"*Grace* strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel our separation deeply, because we have violated another life.

"It strikes us when our disgust for our own being—our indifference, our weakness, our hostility and lack of direction become intolerable. It strikes us when, year after year we resolve to spend more time with family or with self and watch those resolutions go down in flames, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, and despair destroys all joy and courage.

"Sometimes in those moments a wave of light breaks into our darkness and it is as though a voice were saying, "You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of whom you do not know." Don't ask for the name now; maybe you'll find it later. Don't try to do anything now; maybe later you'll do much. Don't seek for anything, don't perform anything, don't intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted.

"When that happens to us we experience *Grace*. And nothing is demanded of this experience; no religious or moral or intellectual prequalification—nothing but acceptance—nothing but surrender and yielding to being accepted. And in that surrender we experience the grace of being able to look frankly into the eyes of another person—and more importantly, we experience the grace being able to stand confidently, with total peace of mind, and look into the eyes of *God*. It is nothing less than the miraculous reunion of life with life."

Our reading of the Isaiah text must never seek to tone down or apologize for its lyrical abandonment. The poem is a healing alternative to the world's grim despair and to our modern sense that no real newness is possible. The text invites us out of our managed rationality to affirm that *God* does what the world thinks is not possible. Advent was, for us, our time of preparation to receive (Christmas) and to announce and share (Epiphany) the celebration; and to do so with singing and marching and thankfulness—and to live *The Possible Dream!*