

BY WHAT PROMISE?
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University Congregational Church
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Reading: Isaiah 65: 17-25 (NEB)

For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth. Former things shall no more be remembered nor shall they be called to mind. Rejoice and be filled with delight, you boundless realms which I create; for I create Jerusalem to be a delight and her people a joy; I will take delight in Jerusalem and rejoice in my people; weeping and cries for help shall never again be heard in her. There no child shall ever again die an infant, no old man fail to live out his life; every boy shall live his hundred years before he dies, whoever falls short of a hundred shall be despised. Men shall build houses and live to inhabit them, plant vineyards and eat their fruit; they shall not build for others to inhabit nor plant for others to eat. My people shall live the long life of a tree, and my chosen shall enjoy the fruit of their labour. They shall not toil in vain or raise children for misfortune. For they are the offspring of the blessed of the Lord and their issue after them; before they call to me, I will answer, and while they are still speaking I will listen to them. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together and the lion shall eat straw like cattle. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

G.K. Chesterton wrote, “Hope means hoping when things are hopeless, or it is no virtue at all...As long as matters are really hopeful, hope is mere flattery or platitude; it is only when everything is hopeless that hope begins to be a strength.”

Such is the case with this stark promise of Isaiah. The images are bold and out of this world. Isaiah declares that women and men will live the promised life in the Promised Land to the fullness of their years. They will enjoy the fruits of their labor. Indeed, they will prosper. The homes and their communities will enjoy abiding peace.

Jerusalem will finally live up to its name, “City of Peace.”

I submit to you that this is the promise that the whole world seeks. This is the hope of every family. It is the promise that every government makes. Peace and prosperity are the values that philosophy and religion have espoused since written history. And

yet it is an unfulfilled promise. We announce the Prince of Peace every Christmas but the threat of terrorism looms everywhere, roadside bombs explode in Afghanistan, children are sold into the sex slave industry, and now cholera plagues Haiti. The problem for people of faith is not diminished just because we have faith.

Isaiah announced that this is the message from God. It is God that is going to create a new heaven and a new earth. Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann observes that this promise of God will not emerge from public processes, agencies, or governments. It will not bloom out of the very best of human will or goodwill.¹ We will not effect the creation of this new heaven and new earth. The Christian church will not be the agent of this new birth. It is beyond the range of human endeavor, secular or sacred. It is also a promise that we have not ever seen a real glimpse of. Where is the evidence? Show us a viable demonstration that God's new history is making front-page headlines. It reminds me of the poem "Petition" by Anglican priest

R. S. Thomas:

And I standing in the shade
 Have seen it a thousand times
 Happen: first theft, then murder:
 Rape: the rueful acts
 Of the blind hand. I have said,
 New prayers, or said the old
 In a new way. Seeking the poem
 In the pain. I have learned
 Silence is best, paying for it
 With my conscience. I am eyes
 Merely, witnessing virtue's
 Defeat; seeing the young born

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 172.

Fair, knowing the cancer
 Awaits them. One thing I have asked
 Of the disposer of the issues
 Of life: that truth should defer
 To beauty. It was not granted.²

Who has not prayed for the safe return of a son or daughter from the battlefield? Who has not stood the vigil of a loved one against the ravages of age or disease, or sat by the fevered bed of child? Who has never kept watch over a dying marriage? Who has not seen the defeat of virtue? These are the same realities that confronted Jews 2500 years ago hoping for the restoration of the Temple. They are the same realities of progressive Christians in the 21st Century.

We know the promise and we hunger for its fulfillment. We question its veracity but can we live without its hope? Is it just wishful thinking? Or maybe we are like a woman was at work when she received a phone call that her daughter was very sick with a fever. She left her work and stopped by the pharmacy to get some medication. She got back to her car and found that she had locked her keys in the car. She didn't know what to do, so she called home and told the baby sitter what had happened. The baby sitter told her that the fever was getting worse. She said, "You might find a coat hanger and use that to open the door."

The woman looked around and found an old rusty coat hanger lying on the ground. Then she looked at the hanger and thought, "I don't know how to use this."

So she bowed her head and asked God to send her some help. Within five minutes an old rusty car pulled up, with a dirty, greasy, bearded man who was wearing an old biker skull rag on his head. The woman thought, "This is what you sent to help me?"

² R.S. Thomas, "Petition," *Collected Poems: 1945-1990* (London: J.M. Dent, 1993), p. 209.

But, she was desperate, so she was also very thankful.

The man got out of his car and asked her if he could help. She said, "Yes, my daughter is very sick. I stopped to get her some medication and I locked my keys in my car. I must get home to her. Please, can you use this hanger to unlock my car?"

He said, "Sure." He walked over to the car, and immediately the car was opened. She hugged the man and through her tears she said, "Thank you so much! You are a very nice man."

The man replied, "Lady, I am not a nice man. I just got out of prison about a week ago. I was in prison for grand theft auto and I am looking for a way to get some money." The woman hugged the man again and with sobbing tears cried out loud, "Oh, thank you God! You even sent me a professional!"³

It has never worked out that way for me. Maybe I just don't have the faith of that mother. There is an incongruity, wrote Brueggemann, between reality and hope. By what promise, then, shall we live? We cannot survive without hope. Without hope we are paralyzed by despair. Without hope fatalism is our best ally and virtue is only happenstance. Where do we turn to when our best efforts fail and our prayers seem to fall on deaf ears?

What if promise is not about a hoped for future? What if God's promise is not optimistic prognostications, or wouldn't it be nice if...? What if God's promise is not the Magic Kingdom? What if God's promise is a subversive activity, an underground movement of grace? I believe that God's promise means that we are not going to accept the current circumstances. We are not going to agree that the status quo is the best we can get for our children, the poor, or our elders. We are going to hold out a vision of promise that reminds us not only of who we are but whom we are meant to be. I hope this will be a fine example of promise as a subversive vision.

³ Make It Clear Ministries, <http://www.makeitclearnow.org/relhumor.html>, downloaded 11/12/10.

There was a school system in a large city that had a program to help children keep up with their schoolwork during stays in the city's hospitals or long sicknesses at home. One day a teacher who was assigned to the program received a routine call asking her to visit a particular child. She took the child's name and room number and talked briefly with the child's regular class teacher. "We're studying nouns and adverbs in his class now," the regular teacher said, "and I'd be grateful if you could help him understand them so he doesn't fall too far behind."

The hospital teacher went to see the boy that afternoon. No one had mentioned to her that the boy had been badly burned and was in great pain. Upset at the sight of the boy, she stammered as she told him, "I've been sent by your school to help you with nouns and adverbs." When she left an hour later she felt she hadn't accomplished much.

But a few days later, a nurse asked her, "What did you do to that boy?" The teacher felt she must have done something wrong and began to apologize. "No, no," said the nurse. "You don't know what I mean. We've been worried about that little boy, but ever since your first visit, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back, responding to treatment. It's as though he's decided to live."

Two weeks later the boy explained that he had completely given up hope until the teacher arrived. Everything changed when he came to a simple realization. He expressed it this way: "They wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs

with a dying boy, would they?"⁴

The boy had no medical knowledge of his prognosis. The teacher's response was awkward at best and even she was not sure what she had accomplished. She offered him nothing more than a lesson on nouns and adverbs. There was no measurable evidence of what the boy could hope for. But for whatever reason an idea came into his head – a subversive idea – that overthrew his despair. Despite the pain that would scar him for the rest of his life, a hint of promise threw off the shackles of a victim and forged him into an advocate for his own future. That is the subtle work of promise.

The message of Isaiah is this: Never be satisfied with the present, especially if the present is painful, debilitating, and degrading. The worse it is, cling that much tighter to the promise of God. Hold on to God's promise that we are never meant to be victims or fall subservient to any human condition or power on earth. Promise is meant to undermine the expectations of the lowest order. Promise is meant to expand our vision of the future in the grandest fashion. Promise is the movement of grace when everything in this life says, "Things don't get any better than this," or "It's just the way things are," or "Grow up and get over it." Promise is the subversive movement of grace.

Promise is subversive of tyranny because it introduces doubt in the mind of the despot. When the next terrorism attack occurs some people will stock up on ammunition. Some will hoard gasoline. Some will amass food. But the people of faith will gather together, hold hands and sing:

⁴ *Bits and Pieces*, July, 1991, <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/h/hope.htm>, downloaded, 11/13/10.

My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing;
Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride,
From every mountainside let freedom ring.⁵

That is not what a terrorist expects. It undermines the intent of fear. Promise introduces the aroma of freedom in the stench of oppression. Promise is the revolutionary song of joy that marches into the funeral service and sings, "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing." It is the slave singing, "Good news, the chariot's coming."

During the Vietnam War the Texas Computer millionaire, H. Ross Perot, decided he would give a Christmas present to every American prisoner of war in Vietnam. According to David Frost, who tells the story, Perot had hundreds of packages wrapped and prepared for shipping. He chartered a Boeing 707 to deliver them to Hanoi, but the war was at its height, and the Hanoi government said it would refuse to cooperate. No charity was possible, officials explained, while American bombers were devastating Vietnamese villages. The wealthy Perot offered to hire an American construction firm to help rebuild what Americans had knocked down. The government still wouldn't cooperate. Christmas drew near, and the packages were unshipped. Refusing to give up, Perot finally took off in his chartered jet and flew to Moscow, where his aides mailed the packages, one at a time, at the Moscow central post office. They were delivered intact.⁶

Ginger Andrews wrote a delightful poem, "The Cure."

⁵ Samuel F. Smith, "My Country, 'Tis of Thee"

⁶ Source unknown. <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/p/perseverance.htm>, downloaded 11/13/2010.

Lying around all day
 with some strange new deep blue
 weekend funk, I'm not really asleep
 when my sister calls
 to say she's just hung up
 from talking with Aunt Bertha
 who is 89 and ill but managing
 to take care of Uncle Frank
 who is completely bed ridden.
 Aunt Bert says
 it's snowing there in Arkansas,
 on Catfish Lane, and she hasn't been
 able to walk out to their mailbox.
 She's been suffering
 from a bad case of mulleygrubs.
 The cure for the mulleygrubs,
 she tells my sister,
 is to get up and bake a cake.
 If that doesn't do it, put on a red dress.⁷

The promise of God is like baking a cake or putting on a red dress. Some times we have to do both. When the sabers rattle the faithful tell the story about the wolf or lion lying down with the lamb, or the one about the child playing next to the adder's nest. When the crops fail and the bank forecloses the faithful sing the song of when those who sow will reap the harvest. When the young are struck down long before their time, we write a poem about the day when all will live to the fullness of their years. That is the subversive work of faith.

It is my vocation to tell these subversive stories. The church is called to keep hope alive. Each of us is meant to keep the promise of God's grace in the worst of circumstances. Those are the promises we live by.

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⁷ Ginger Andrews, "The Cure," *Good Poems for Hard Times*, selected by Garrison Keillor (New York: Viking Press, 2005), p. 115.