

WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?
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University Congregational Church
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Reading: Isaiah 25: 1-10 (NRSV)

O Lord, you are my God;

I will exalt you, I will praise your name;

**for you have done wonderful things,
plans formed of old, faithful and sure.**

**For you have made the city a heap,
the fortified city a ruin;**

**the palace of aliens is a city no more,
it will never be rebuilt.**

**Therefore strong people will glorify you;
cities of ruthless nations will fear you.**

**For you have been a refuge to the poor,
a refuge to the needy in their distress,**

a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat.

**When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm,
the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place,**

**you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds;
the song of the ruthless was stilled.**

**On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,**

of rich food filled with marrow, of well aged wines strained clear.

**And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,**

**the sheet that is spread over all nations;
he will swallow up death forever.**

**Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the Lord has spoken.**

It will be said on that day,

Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.

This is the Lord for whom we have waited;

let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain.

I could not possibly stand before you this morning and speak as though nothing unusual or historic had happened this week in American history. Everyone of us have been affected by the effort of the United States Congress to confront the financial crises we are facing as a nation; the sharp decline in the stock market; and the consequent corrosion of our retirement savings, 401 K plans, and other investments. Many people now have to reconsider their plans for retirement and think about how many more years of work are required of them to sustain their standard of living. We know that millions of families have lost their homes. Students are having difficulty financing their education. There are legitimate concerns about the viability of Social Security and Medicare.

Perhaps you will appreciate my anger when I went into Orscheln's the other day to purchase a fencing tool. I went up to the cash register and said to the cashier, "How are you today?"

"I would be better if I didn't have to be here," she replied, in a fairly hostile tone.

I bit my tongue. I wanted to say, "You have a job, don't you?"

These are difficult financial times. Everyone is anxious, perhaps even frightened. And let's not fool ourselves, our sense of self and security is every bit related to our sense of financial well-being. The Dow Jones had the worst week ever, closing on Friday at 8,451, a drop of 18.2% for the week. It fell 1,900 points. Some economists predict that it could fall to somewhere in the 7,000 range before we hit bottom.

Now I ask you, could a congregation pick a worse time to initiate its stewardship campaign? Wouldn't you think that most members of the church would be inclined to shelter their assets, shore up their financial defenses? Has our stewardship chair, Dick Hanson, lost his mind?

I am reminded of a woman who was in financial difficulties when her business failed and she found herself deeply in debt. Her house was in foreclosure, she had maxed out her credit cards, and she owed the IRS thousands of dollars. She fell to her knees, looked toward heaven and prayed to God for help and guidance. A voice from heaven told her to take the last \$27.53 in her purse and give it to her church.

Still on her knees, looking heavenward she prayed, “Is there anyone else up there?”

Yes, even in the midst of our national financial calamity, even in the hard reality of personal investment losses, even in the midst of apparent political confusion and transition, the church dares to ask if it can continue to rely on your generosity of spirit and purse.

You might be thinking that now I have lost my mind. That could be argued. But I can assure you that I have not lost my vision for the future of University Congregational Church; I have not lost the sense of our purpose as a congregation; and I have not lost my understanding of the destiny that God calls us to.

Not for a moment would I diminish the responsibility that every person in this church has for the security of his or her person and family. I do not underestimate the financial realities that slap each of us in the face. I have a family, I have kids in college, and I have to think about retirement at some point in my life.

But as a Christian, I cannot define my life solely on the security of myself and my own. I am called to a larger future, yes for my family, but also for my neighbors, and for my world. And I wonder if the current financial fiasco is, in part, rooted in the limits of a worldview bound by profit margins, consumerism, and material indulgences. Inevitably that

house of cards is blown away by speculation, imprudent loans, bad debt, and unethical accounting practices. Dare I say that such a vision inevitably falls into the cycle of tougher lending laws, tighter credit practices, and governmental regulations? But in time these will loosen up and we will get careless again. Bulls and bears run through the market system on a fairly regular basis.

I suppose that we could take some comfort in that. But is that sufficient? Is that the only vision that we have for God's people? Is a free market economy the only image by which to measure the success of a nation and her citizens? Is this the guiding light of the church as well?

The prophet, and that is spelled p-r-o-p-h-e-t not p-r-o-f-i-t, Isaiah discerns a different view of the future. Like our current financial crash, Isaiah described the city of the world that has been crushed to a heap. The fortified city was in ruin. That city was so utterly destroyed that it cannot be restored. Even the ruthless cutthroats have been silenced. The shrill voices of fear and deception have been muted. The false promises echo no more. The empty political endorsements are scattered by the winds. In their strength lie the rubble of Alexandria, Athens, Rome, London, and Washington. It is truly an apocalyptic vision that references no particular city in history, but applies to the inevitable fate of every city in time. Their cultures erode, their financial systems in ruin, their armies lie in defeat, and their governments are overthrown.

Now don't give up on me yet. Remember this is poetry. We are progressive Christians and we can handle metaphor.

Isaiah declared that the end time, the apocalypse of God, does not end with destruction. Rather, a new city rises up on the mountain. God will host a banquet to which everyone is invited. It is a feast "for all

peoples.” The richest food and well-aged wine will be served. The hearty marrow will be scooped out of the bones to fortify our own. The wines will be strained, leaving not the least particle of pulp.

And then Isaiah makes a remarkable claim. God, too, will feast at this banquet. And what is the entrée of God? God will swallow up death. The Creator of life will consume the dread fear of death that drapes over every human being and every nation. It is like lying under a wool blanket in a steamy swamp in Georgia in the month of August. Death is the shroud that weighs upon every conscience. The very lips of Yahweh will eat the stalker of dreams and hopes. We will dine on succulent meats and fine wines. God will absorb death. And with his very own napkin will wipe away the tears of those who weep and mourn. All of the shame that we have known and the sorrow that we have suffered will find comfort and rest on the mountain of God.

Please – don’t give up on me yet. Don’t get out of that pew yet. We are still talking about poetry here. We are still talking about a prophet’s metaphor for the Kingdom of God. We are spinning out the vision that Isaiah cast for God’s will and rule for human beings. This is what we would see if we could look to the future with God’s eyes. This is the world we would shape if we could look to the future with God’s heart. This is the community we would create if we could look to the future with God’s mind.

Oops! Now I have done it. I fear I may have gone too far. I have moved from metaphor to calling; poetry to responsibility; and vision to church. Even with Wall Street shaking and Main Street quaking, I am convinced that we are still called to travel the Way of hope and promise. No matter what happens in the world we are still the stewards of God’s

peace, God's justice, and God's brotherhood. I believe that the covenant of University Congregational Church is still binding on me, regardless of the status of my retirement account.

I dare say that this church has a budget, develops programs, calls ministers and hires staff because we have a word of hope, a truth about love, a commitment to justice and peace. We conduct a stewardship campaign, even in the midst of tough economic times, because we have a vision of the mountain where everyone is fed and fears are consoled. We worship God in this beautiful sanctuary because we believe that the promises of God are worthy of our investments of time, money, and talent. We join this church because we believe that every human being has a place at the table of God's grace – not just in religious poetry but also in chicken and biscuits, shelter and clothing, work and health care, art and education.

Yitzhak Buxbaum tells the Jewish tale of Hayya Schechter.

“Hayya Schechter was a pious woman whose home in Tel Aviv was open to all, like the legendary home of Abraham and Sarah. There was never a day when she and her husband did not have guests. Rabbis, rebbes, and simple people alike all ate at their table and everyone was treated like a king or queen. Some guests live in the house for months and a time; sometime there were ten such guests, at other times as many and thirty! And all of them were made to feel as if they were in their own home.

Hayya was always ready to give everything she had to another human being. She had reached perfection in kindness, and her giving was done wholeheartedly and joyfully.

Another aspect of her perfection in kindness was reported by one of her sons, who said that his mother had once sent him to borrow some money from a neighbor. When he returned with the money in hand, she took the envelope with the money in it from him, placed it somewhere, and never even opened it.

Her son asked, “Mother, why did you borrow the money if you didn’t want to use it?”

“I did it,” she explained, ‘so that our neighbor won’t be ashamed to borrow from us when he’s in need.’”¹

There should never be any shame or embarrassment when a church asks its members and friends for their financial support. In the Unitarian Universalist Congregations from whence I came it was expected of the minister to deliver the annual “Sermon on the Amount.” We will take care of our financial obligations. And let it be said of University Congregational Church that ours is an open home, an open heart, and an open hand.

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¹ Yitzhak Buxbaum, *Jewish Tales of Holy Women* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), pp. 89-90.