

WHERE IMAGINATION CAN TAKE YOU

© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine

University Congregational Church

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Reading: Isaiah 49: 7-12 (NEB)

Thus says the Holy One, the Lord who ransoms Israel, to one who thinks little of himself, whom every nation abhors, the slave of tyrants: When they see you kings shall rise, princes shall rise and bow down, because of the Lord who is faithful, because of the Holy One of Israel who has chosen you.

Thus says the Lord: In the hour of my favour I answered you, and I helped you on the day of deliverance, putting the land to rights and sharing out afresh its desolate fields; I said to the prisoners, "Go free," and to those in darkness, "Come out and be seen."

They shall find pasture in the desert sands, and grazing on all dunes. They shall neither hunger nor thirst, no scorching heat or sun shall distress them; for one who loves them shall lead them and take them to water at bubbling springs. I will make every hill a path and build embankments for my highways. See, they come; some from far away, these from the north and these from the west and those from the land of Syene.

Shout for joy, you heavens, rejoice, O earth, you mountains, break into songs of triumph, for the Lord has comforted his people and has had pity on his own in their distress.

This reading from Deutero Isaiah is an exile and exodus story. The Jews are held captive in Babylon just as they were once held in slavery in Egypt. They hunger for freedom and the return to Jerusalem as they once hungered for freedom and the Promised Land.

As a people in exile they are disgraced. They have lost their homes, livelihoods, financial resources, and political freedoms. They are forcibly removed from their country and the culture they cherish. They are despised and ridiculed, thought to be filthy, and degraded. Throughout the Bible there is a distinct relationship between suffering and shame. Recall the Protestant hymn, "The Old Rugged Cross." The opening stanza reads, "On a hill far away stood an old rugged

cross, the emblem of suffering and shame.” The tradition affirms that there is a relationship between suffering and shame.

Do not think we are so far removed from it. People today associate all kinds of suffering with shame. Cancer, unemployment, divorce, loss of public office, depression and other forms of mental illness cause people embarrassment and shame. I cannot tell you the number of times over the last three decades that people have come to my office to unburden themselves with a story of suffering. Perhaps they were sexually molested as a child, or had some kind of extramarital affair, or how they lost their faith in God with the death of a loved one. We may spend an hour to an hour and a half together. They may weep and wonder why. And then they leave my office and I never see them again. I may later learn that they are now attending another church. I wonder if they left the suffering and shame in my office so they would be free for a new minister or new church? I wonder if they do not come back because they left the suffering but not the shame? Do they worry that I am now ashamed of them? I certainly hope not.

The people of Israel were called to be the people of promise. They are God’s chosen people, destined to be God’s servant nation. It is hard to imagine yourself the light of the world when you are imprisoned in the darkness of a foreign land. But the prophet Isaiah says that is exactly the moment when God’s favor shines on the people. When you think you least deserve it, when every ounce of reserve and where-with-all seem depleted, when it appears that you do not have a friend in the world and people keep shoveling on the guilt, when all anyone can say to you, “Man, your life sucks,” God arrives on the scene.

Yes, I am talking about the day when the school calls to tell you that your child has been suspended for two weeks, your spouse got laid off from work, the washing machine broke, and your mother calls to ask why you have not called her today, forgetting that you called just an hour ago. Yes, that is the very same day, the very hour when the doorbell rings and there is a bookseller at the front door. The peddler is offering books of poetry. What you may not realize when you say “no thank you” and close the door, is that this is no ordinary merchant. It is no other than the living God, dressed in gabardine holding an oil stained and scuffed-up brief case. God visits house to house, offering these books of poetry. Sometimes we call the poems Psalms, or Wisdom, or Parable, or Lore, or Story.

You see, the poets offer highly imaginative visions of how things might be, even in the midst of your worst calamity. Listen again to the poetic imagination that Isaiah brought to his suffering family.

God will establish the land. An alienated people will be brought home. We will be reconciled. There will be a homecoming and we will be at our ease with one another. The prisoners will be set free. Yes the criminal, but also those in the gaol of fear and insecurity, or prejudice and injustice. Those in bond will come forth to claim a new future. Those who were in darkness will see a new light. We will be protected and fed. All who have been dispersed will be reunited. Desert sands will sprout abundant pasture and cattle will graze on the sand dunes. Fresh springs well up as paths are made straight. And all of the nations and peoples who once held us in derision and ridicule will be astonished at our freedom. They will be awed by the

power of God's resilience. They will scarce believe that God's grace stood fast beside us and restored us to vitality.

Now you are probably thinking that this is some of the most ridiculous stuff you have ever heard. But I was talking to Albert Einstein the other day. He said, "Gary, don't forget to tell your people on Sunday the truth. 'Logic will get you from A to B. Imagination will take you everywhere.'" Before logic even conceives of a plan of freedom, imagination must first inspire it.

I have been watching closely this week the freedom movements that have been moving across the Middle East. The streets of Libya, Tunisia, Bahrain, Iraq, and others are flooded with people demanding the universal rights of every human being. News reports attribute this movement to technology. They report the power of the Internet, Facebook, Twitter, email, and cell phones as the means by which the people's movement is carried. Well, without a doubt the power of technology has been essential to its success. But we would be mistaken to think that technology is the source of salvation. Before technology there was the Sacred imagination that envisioned a people free from brutality and servitude. That is the entire story of faith, from Abraham to Jesus, to you and me.

Paul reflects on Isaiah's theme in his letter to the church at Corinth. "In the hour of my favour I answered you, and I helped you on the day of deliverance." (II Corinthians 6:2) Paul's argument is that God's movement of freedom and deliverance is now. That day has dawned. We are called to play our part in the reconciling love of God. Salvation is a day-by-day experience, even though we remain in Babylon, or Afghanistan, or Cairo, or loss of business, or unemployment, or a fatal prognosis.

God is with us in the midst of suffering. The difference is that we are not ashamed.

God is with us as we serve and work to restore the dignity of human beings.

When Jewish psychiatrist, Victor Frankl, was arrested by the Nazis in World War II, he was stripped of everything, including property, family, and possessions. He had spent years researching and writing a book on the importance of finding meaning in life, concepts that later would be known as logotherapy. When he arrived in Auschwitz, the infamous death camp, even his manuscript, which he had hidden in the lining of his coat, was taken away.

"I had to undergo and overcome the loss of my spiritual child," Frankl wrote. "Now it seemed as if nothing and no one would survive me, neither a physical nor a spiritual child of my own! I found myself confronted with the question of whether under such circumstances my life was ultimately void of any meaning."

He was still wrestling with that question a few days later when the Nazis forced the prisoners to give up their clothes.

"I had to surrender my clothes and in turn inherited the worn-out rags of an inmate who had been sent to the gas chamber," said Frankl. "Instead of the many pages of my manuscript, I found in the pocket of the newly acquired coat a single page torn out of a Hebrew prayer book, which contained the main Jewish prayer, *Shema Yisrael* (Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one God. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.)

"How should I have interpreted such a 'coincidence' other than as a challenge to *live* my thoughts instead of merely putting them on paper?"

Later, as Frankl reflected on his ordeal, he wrote in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, "There is nothing in the world that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions, as the knowledge that there is a meaning in one's life . . . He who has a *why* to live for can bear almost any *how*."¹

The “Why to live” is the work of Sacred Imagination. That is the dream, the song, the story, the poem, and the parable of God. That is the work of salvation even as we serve those who suffer, even when we suffer ourselves. That is still the work of the church today.

Without a doubt the Christian church across America is in decline. Some people have announced that ours is a post-Christian America. The average age of members is higher than ever and the interest in young people is diminishing. One could argue that this decline is a result of irrelevancy. Others think that we have not infused our worship with enough entertainment values. There is a disdainful attitude in society toward the church, under constant attack by every manner of critic. People are repulsed by the scandals of pedophile priests, preachers running away with the church's treasury or someone's wife or someone's retirement funds, or all of the above. Inevitably there are grievous sins against the church and human beings who serve them.

¹ The source of this illustration is not known. Found at <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/s/suffering.htm>. Downloaded 2/26/2011.

To be perfectly honest with you, I do not think that human flaws are the greatest threat to the Christian church. More damaging to the church is the loss of our identity and purpose. We are called to walk in the shoes of the Fisher of Men – and Women – and Children. We take up the Cross where he left it at Golgotha, encouraging the stragglers in life; picking up the wounded, lifting the crippled, consoling the lonely, guiding the confused, and putting to rest those whose journey has ended. Every step along the way is a step of grace. Our journey is the path of salvation where our minds soar in the imagination of God’s freedom and dignity.

No matter how heavy the burden or how slowly we trudge the journey our confidence is in God’s faithfulness. God is with us, through thick and thin. I think of John Haynes Holmes’ “Hymn of At-One-Ment.”

Thou God of all, whose spirit moves
 From pole to silent pole;
 Whose purpose binds the starry spheres
 In one stupendous whole;
 Whose life, like light, is freely poured
 On all men ‘neath the sun;
 To Thee we lift our hearts, and pray
 That Thou will make us one.
 One in the patient company
 Of those who heed Thy will,
 And steadfastly pursue the way

Of Thy commandments still,
 One in the holy fellowship
 Of those who challenge wrong,
 And lift the spirit's sword to shield
 The weak against the strong.
 One in the truth that makes men free,
 The faith that makes men brave;
 One in the love that suffers long
 To seek, and serve, and save;
 One in the vision of Thy peace,
 The kingdom yet to be –
 When Thou shalt be the God of all,
 And all be one in Thee.²

The need for such a faith as this will never be diminished by new knowledge, technology, science, or social convention. A church devoted to such a faith as this will never become irrelevant, however faded and tattered we seem to be. At the core of this faith is a God whose poetry constantly sings the song of hope and airs the melody of human worth and dignity. This is the song of God's grace whose belief in us far exceeds our hope in God. This is the God who is with us, even when we abandon our best intentions, highest aspirations, and clearest values. This is the God who delivers us every step of the way.

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² John Haynes Holmes, "Hymn of At-One-Ment," *Masterpieces of Religious Verse*, edited by James Dalton Morrison (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948), pp. 67-68.