

“Back to the Future”
Isaiah 2:1-5
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1st Sunday in Advent
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I was working with Isaiah’s grand vision of the future in a coffee shop on the day after Thanksgiving when this song came over the sound system – [sing “Let It Snow”]. I find it difficult to look forward to the future in a season that has become much more deeply tied to nostalgia for the past. In the future - “the days to come” – Isaiah says, the “holiest ground becomes the highest ground,”¹ in the words of one scholar, world peace is finally established because God arbitrates between the nations and establishes justice, and all of our weapons are turned into things to cultivate the land and feed each other. Yet as I drank from a seasons greetings coffee cup, watched weary Black Friday consumers stumble in for their afternoon caffeine fix and heard “Let It Snow” 3 different times in 3 hours, it was hard to imagine Isaiah’s glorious, world changing future.

It’s hard to imagine any future, much less Isaiah’s utopian one, when you are obsessed with the past. Our current President won an election based on romanticizing the past – “Make America Great Again.” And many who oppose him think they can unseat him with a similar strategy – “Make America Sane Again.” They may be looking back to a *different* place and a *different* vision but it’s *still looking backward*. It’s going back to a preferred time in our history as if returning to the past can take us to the future.

If we are honest most of us do the same thing, especially in this season. We bring decorations, or special foods, or particular rituals from our past childhoods into our present celebrations. It’s why the Christmas Eve service will be one of our largest crowds of the year even though we’ll do almost exactly the same thing that we did as last year and the year before that: sing the same hymns, light the same candles, announce the same good news. If I monkeyed with those rituals too much, I’m pretty sure I would destroy the season for everybody.

I’m not sure Isaiah’s vision of the future has a chance next to our longings for the past. I’m not sure we can envision nations at peace, while drinking from our seasons greetings coffee cups; I’m not sure we can imagine weapons turned into garden tools while we’re singing Let It Snow. I’m not sure that the holiest ground can become the highest ground while the nostalgia has all of our attention. Except that Isaiah seems to be doing a similar kind of thing. He’s looking *back to the same temple* that used to be glimmering before it was destroyed. *Back to the same temple* where they said the old prayers. *Back to the same temple* on the same location where people once counted on the special presence of God. Isaiah thinks we can get to the future by going back to the past. As one scholar writes, “In a chaotic situation in which people were tempted either to throw out all forms of the

¹ Paul Simpson Duke, “Homiletical Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2010, Year A, Volume 1, p. 4.

past or to cling mindlessly to tradition out of fear of change, it was terribly important [for the exiles] to maintain a comprehensive vision of reality ordered around one life-giving center.”

This back to the future mentality seems counter-intuitive until you see what kind of world we get when we disconnect the future from the past. For example, adopting every new piece of technology as an automatic good for us, forgetting those old Sabbath warnings that economies of endless production that make slaves of people who can't get a break from work that finds us on our smartphones 24/7. See what kind of world we've gotten by tapping every source of energy with no concern for the impact of God's good creation. Or see what kind of a world we are creating by forcing our children to compete for every advantage with no regard to that old conviction that every human being has value not because of what they produce but because we are all children of God.

Isaiah believes the future is linked with the past. Memories of the past help inform our future gaze. They give us visions of what justice might look like, visions of what peace could look like, visions of what our own longings for grace might look like. This fits well with the Hebrew concept of time which is more like a spiral than a straight line, circling around to similar places where we've been before with a slightly different orbit. Sometimes we need to circle around to a similar place we've been before to ignite our vision of possibility – of what could be.

Maybe that is why Isaiah talks about the word that Isaiah “saw” instead of “heard.” One of the universals of community organizing is that you cannot build what you cannot imagine.² It's part of our problem in the city right now. We have a hard time imagining a city without vacants, imagining a city where no one is on a corner because everyone has a home, imagining a city where drug abuse is treated as an illness instead of crime, imagining a school system that gets at least as much from the city budget as does the police. We have a hard time imagining a state where we work together to bridge the gaps between rich and poor, to address historic inequities in race that have led to our current divisions and inequities, where politics is the tool that we use to work together across differences instead of the wedge that we use for partisan advantage.

Sometimes we have a hard time imagining that kind of future in our own lives. Imagining a fulfilling work life. Imagining a different dynamic in a dysfunctional familial relationship. Imagining happiness for yourself or for someone you love.

Isaiah *saw* the word of God – he *saw a vision* of God, a future not yet here that resides in his imagination, informed by the past. And this gave Isaiah hope for the possibility that God is at work in our present predicaments. Walter Brueggemann describes this kind of prophecy as a “re-description of history through which the purposes of [God] are given utterance.”³ Or as my friend and colleague, Jessica Tate,

² I am indebted to the Rev. Jessica Tate for this connection and several others in this sermon, taken from her paper on a different section of Isaiah, given to our preaching group, The Well.

³ Brueggemann, Walter. *Isaiah 40-66: Westminster Bible Companion*. Louisville: WJKP, 1998, p. 2.

describes prophecy – the process of “recovering our sight for the ways in which God is at work, impinging in our own time.”⁴

This ability to see God at work now – to see the word of God – is the basis for all hope. Once you have seen the world from the vantage point of God’s possibilities, it is impossible to live with the status quo. “Once you have glimpsed the world as it might be, as it ought to be, as it’s going to be. . .” the Reverend Victoria Safford writes in her essay on hope, “. . .it is impossible to live compliant and complacent anymore in the world as it is... And so you come out and walk out and march, the way a flower comes out and blooms, because it has no other calling. It has no other work.”⁵

I saw that king of flowering yesterday in a funeral home director. I was riding with her in a hearse on the way to the cemetery to bury the mother of our member, Brian Boles. It was a bit of a drive so we had plenty of time for me to ask all the questions that I’ve wanted to ask people in the mortuary science business, such as “why would you ever?” Like all people who count themselves called into their vocations, particularly odd ones, she had a story from her past. It was the story of her special relationship with her grandfather whom she spent a great deal of time with. She was with him when he died, felt the warmth of his hands slowly fade, his countenance change. When he died, she told me, I couldn’t fathom how someone you love could be with you one day and then not the next. I was fascinated by the whole process – not just the physical process – but by my own grief. I realized that I wanted to be with people through all of it. Even though it hurts, even though the questions remain unanswered.” In the midst of healing through her own grief, she found hope that could be shared with others.

This is the part of Advent that cannot wait – the hoping. Hope is living in the gap between the world as we find it, and the world that God promises, not necessarily with immediate happiness, or joy but with longing. Longing for the future justice and peace that God promises. A longing that leads to purposeful action where we participate in the future that God is bringing about. Longing that gives us all places to stand whether we are grieving or celebrating, laughing or weeping, struggling with the weight of the season or eagerly anticipating its joy.

Isaiah invites us to “come, live in the light.” It is a summons into this kind of longing, into this kind of hopeful living. Of sharing what we have because we trust the world economy has to move in that direction at some future point. Of releasing resentments in our own lives and extending forgiveness to others because we see how much possibility it has generated for each of us. Of forsaking violence in our world, in our lives, and embracing a different way of communicating because we see what nonviolence has accomplished in the past when the people of God have embraced it with their full selves. Of rejecting the consumerist ideas that would have us purchase our way into joy, recalibrating our lives around the simple things that have brought us joy in the past – of shared meals, human connection, labor that benefits the common good.

⁴ Jessica Tate, paper to The Well.

⁵ Sarah Bessey blog post, “Advent is for the Ones Who Know Longing,” November 29, 2014, <https://sarahbessey.com/advent-the-ones-who-know-longing/>.

So let those past reminders of joy and gladness play over the loudspeakers of our memories, but don't try to recreate them. Let the seasons greetings coffee cups, the Christmas pop songs, and the lights that that hang from the rafters, take us forward into hope for a future joy that God is bringing. Hope that grows from the soil of our longing for justice and joy.