

The day after the election, a tongue-in-cheek headline in *the Onion* magazine exclaimed “Black Man Given Nation’s Worst Job.” The article went on to detail the challenges confronting the new president, ranging from a critical economic situation and crumbling infrastructure to the impossibility of having to please more than 300 million Americans. “The job,” the article observed, “comes with such intense scrutiny and so certain a guarantee of failure that only one other person even bothered applying for it. ‘It just goes to show you,’” one commentator noted, “that, in this country, a black man still can’t catch a break.”

All humor aside, few of us would dispute the seriousness of the issues confronting us as a nation and as a world as we enter 2009. The signs of the time are not robust and hopeful, but fearsome. The tottering world economy, exacerbated by war in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Middle East along with the tragic disregard for human rights in Kenya, the Republic of Congo and Tibet, the unending genocide in Darfur and the massive increases in fuel and food prices world wide, overwhelm our sensibilities.

While Larry and I have been focusing on what the economic downturn means to our retirement, our daughter has shared with us something of what it means to troubled children. Just at the moment when 1.2 million of our children have been cut from employer-sponsored health insurance, cuts in public mental health services are leaving children and their families with little or no access to help. If the situation looks bleak to us, how much more so must it be for them?

Writing for the December issue of *Christian Ethics Today*, a respected colleague in ministry, William Hull, shares his personal journey upon receiving the diagnosis of Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, better known as ALS or Lou Gehrig’s disease. Fully aware of the deadly course of his illness, “where,” he asks, “does one find God in the darkness?” Refusing to place his hope in an unlikely cure or in flight to an otherworldly hope, this consummate student of the Bible wrestles with the reality of two worlds—one spiritual and eternal, the other earthly and unfinished. For those of us who gather every Sunday morning to pray for the realization of God’s will “on earth as it is in heaven,” the working out of our hope cannot flee or deny the realities of this world. It must be able to look even the worst of those realities in the face and still endure.

We live from memory. If we would be informed by our faith on how to maintain hope in the darkness, we would do well to look to scripture. Not in an effort to be strictly orthodox but out of a desire to benefit from the insights gained by those who have wrestled the darkness before us. Step back, then, two-and-a-half millennia and walk among a people who seem to have lost everything. They have languished for decades in captivity far from home. Few, if any, have any direct recollection of what home was like. They have all, of course, heard what it was like to possess their own land, serve their own king and worship in their own Temple. All of these, however, had been lost. Their esteemed Temple and David’s royal city lay in ruins. Furthermore, for more than 800 years, the Assyrians and after them the Babylonians had crafted the experience of exile into a fine art. Innumerable populations of people had been carried into exile with no hope of returning home. Add to this the reality that most of Jerusalem’s exiles believed fault for their present situation resided in the moral failure of their own nation, and the extent of their dismal appraisal of their own future becomes apparent.

“Face it!” trusted voices of the day assured the exiles. “We’re here to stay. Things aren’t going to get any better, and we’d better learn to live with it.”

Recall that at a point early in the exile, the prophet Jeremiah had indeed counseled the exiles to give themselves to building a meaningful home where they were; but now Second Isaiah, preaching a generation later, urges them to turn their eyes toward home. The news is both good and bad. Hope for a return home—yes. Recognize, however, that home is positioned on the other side of the wilderness or desert, a place of extreme danger and risk, a place of testing.

“Live from your memory,” Isaiah urges the exiles. “Remember the God who ‘makes a way through the sea,’ who overwhelms ‘chariot and horse, army and warrior.’” Remember the power and the love and the trustworthiness of the God who has acted in your past; and moving forward to face the terrors that lie ahead, trust in that God.

For us, as with the exiles, Isaiah does not hold out the promise that somehow we will miraculously be spared the desert nor that the lethal threat of the desert will not cause us pain. The promise is simply the age old promise “I will be with you.” The waters will not overwhelm you nor the fire consume you. The promise is one of God’s provision in every wilderness that lies ahead of us, even as we live from the rich memory of the God who has journeyed with us and with God’s people through the ages.

Reminiscent of the daily manna the children of Israel received in the wilderness, Isaiah gives promise of God’s provision of “streams in the desert.” Sometimes translated “rivers,” the Hebrew word carries the connotation of “a small thread of water”—just enough to get us through the day, but in the end enough.

If we are looking for assurances that we will not know pain or testing, Isaiah’s words may be something of a disappointment. The wilderness is a place through which we must go to get to the future. It is a place, however, through which we walk one step at a time in the presence of God and with God’s gracious provision. And that’s enough.

We live toward the future. In the same voice that Isaiah calls us to remember, he also calls us to forget: “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” How do we deal with the obvious contradiction here. How do we live from our rich memory of the grace that has nourished our past and forget that which lies behind us at the same time?

Perhaps Isaiah is utilizing hyperbole here, a time honored device common in our scriptures. On the same order of Jesus’ metaphor of

the difficulty of a camel passing through the eye of a needle or cutting off an offending hand to keep the entire body from perishing, Isaiah is calling the exiles and us beyond our comfort zones and into the future. Someone has proposed that the seven last words of the church are “We’ve never done it that way before;” and so it is with faith of any time that becomes frozen in place, wed to the old, familiar way of doing things. Faith does not just look behind us; it also looks to the future.

The God who would do a new thing is not the god we would keep closed up safely in our little boxes of habit and limited expectation. The God who would do a new thing is not the god we conveniently let off the leash to do our bidding. The God who would do a new thing is the God who is not just behind and with God’s people, but the God who bids them forward into the new day. The God who would do a new thing is the God of hope that beckons us, yes, through the uncertainty and discomfort of the wilderness to invest our lives in the possibility that the imperfect and unfinished and even cruel world in which we live can be brought closer to living out God’s will “on *earth* as it is in heaven.”

In the final analysis, then, hope in God is not about denying the crises that surround us collectively or which we face personally, one by one. Hope in God is about the light of God’s goodness encountering the darkness and being enough to withstand and take us through the darkness one step at a time. It is, in the words of Matthew Fox, about likening the darkness to “the darkness of the womb, the place where in the midst of fear and anguish new life is conceived” [In J. Strohl, *Word & World*, Winter 1995].

On April 16, 1963, Martin Luther King sat in prison, penning on whatever scrap of paper he could lay his hands on his now acclaimed “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” In it he sought to lay out in some detail something of the dark night of the soul for blacks throughout the land and why they could not wait for justice. A short four months later he stood to give his “I Have a Dream” speech in Washington, D.C. Certainly, he had not forgotten the agony of the jails that had held and the beatings that had beset those who participated in the Civil Rights Movement, but yet he dreamed.

Thirty-eight years ago Chath Piersath and two brothers fled the Kymer Rouge and their ruthless siege of Cambodia. Still today this gifted artist and poet fills his work with haunting images from that past and suffering faces from present day Cambodia; and yet he still speaks in terms of his dream for a country healed of its brutality even as he returns and works among his countrymen to bring that dream to a reality.

Rachel Naomi Remen, a physician who is dedicated to helping doctors recover the meaning of their service, shares stories from her grandfather. One early experience recalls a lesson her grandfather taught her in the gift of a paper cup with soil. “Water it everyday,” he told her, “and it will surprise you.” Following his instruction day by day, the four year old became weary until the day when she suddenly discovered an emerging plant. Excitedly she took it to him. “Is this the surprise?” she asked. “Yes,” he acknowledged. “So all it needs is water?” she asked. “No,” he said, taking her small face between his hands. “All it needs is your faithfulness.”

And so it is with us and the wilderness through which we find our way. What is needed is our faithfulness to the promise, one day, one step at a time.