

## To Such as These

sermon digest

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Isaiah 65:17-25; Mark 10:13-16

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When you get right down to it, it makes us nervous. Maybe it's because we have seen it so abused in the past. Maybe it's because we have seen it become the reason for inaction on matters of tragic proportions. Maybe it's just because our lives are pretty good, and we feel pretty well equipped to rely upon our own personal resources in confronting most of the challenges that present themselves to us. I recall Granvil Kyker, a person for whom I had the deepest respect, commenting one day that he didn't have any idea of whether there was an afterlife. He figured that his life had been so rich, so full, so blessed that God did not owe him anything more. I appreciated his sentiments and recognized a thoroughgoing sense of gratitude that permeated his life, making his life a blessing not just to himself, but to others.

But what about those for whom life has not been good? I am speaking here not of those who are simply missing an inner sense of well being, but of those for whom every day of their life is blighted with pain, either psychological or physical. What of those born into a situation of grinding poverty, overwhelming violence and injustice? What of those who live every day of their lives under the thumb of a cruel despot, ready to stamp out any voice of freedom, any spark of resistance, however small? Historically, hope for God's new day, whether it is hope of heaven or hope for God's day of vindication and justice in this life, has taken on life and given life among people who are struggling under the heavy load of war, injustice, and want. If we have trouble appreciating talk of God's new day, it may have something to do with our bad experiences in seeing it manipulated into being nothing more than pie-in-the-sky that makes people passively await God's action; or it may be that we are out of touch with people in our society and world whose situation is such that God's action alone seems to offer any way out of their suffering, any possibility of hope.

I would suggest to you an alternative view—a view that I judge to be completely in keeping with the teaching of scripture. Rather than calling us away from the world, rather than abandoning us to merely shield our eyes from either our own sense of pain and loss or the tragic lives of so many in our world, the hope of God's new day strengthens and mobilizes us. It gives us a new standard of measure. Rather than settling for the status quo assumption that nothing can ever really change, it puts before us a standard urging us from despair to hope. It calls us to action.

**Hope for God's new day is an antidote to despair and helplessness.** The most hopeful words in scripture are voiced in the face of gross injustice and need. Consider the people of Judah, newly returned from exile. Fearful of the long trek back through the wilderness, many had chosen to stay in Babylon. Those who had the courage to make the trip did so with the words of the prophets ringing in their ears. They had stepped forward in the assurance that the rough places over which they traveled would be smoothed and the crooked places made straight. The very trees would clap their hands as they walked along the way, and streams of water and blooming flowers would spring up in the desert. And yet, even after their risky, courageous journey, they arrived at a city in ruins. The comradery of fellow travelers quickly dissipated before challenges that stretched their patience and their resources to the nth degree. Beset with economic hardship and the incredibly slow progress of rebuilding, they also met up with the hostility of long term residents in the land who extended absolutely no welcome upon their return. They questioned themselves. They questioned one another. And they questioned God. Where was God in all of this? Where was the God who had supposedly pointed them homeward? Where could they look for any semblance of hope to keep them going?

The prophet listens to their pleas, We call him Third Isaiah—the third and final spokesperson for God who speaks to us in the last eleven chapters of the book we call Isaiah. Hurting for his people even though he has pointed out to them the numerous points at which they are their own worst enemy, he leans back for a moment and searches for the words that will give them hope to sustain them for the hard work ahead of them. Notice that he does not close his eyes to the injustices and the suffering they are experiencing, often at the hands of their brothers and sisters. He looks the inequities right in the eye and paints a stark picture of contrast. The God of all creation is about to create again; and the new creation will outshine not just the first creation, but every act of kindness and deliverance God has performed in their history.

Looking around at the situation of workers who build houses day after day that they do not earn enough to live in and agricultural workers who work all day in the fields but do not earn enough to feed their families, the prophet looks to the day when those who build will live in the houses they build; and those who plant and harvest will eat. Reflecting on the endless toil that holds so many of them in its grip and the early death of children and youth, God's design, the prophet assures them, is that they "not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity" (65:23). Recalling that they as a people have lived on the brink of extinction from the very earliest days of their existence, the prophet paints a poignant scene of peace: "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox. . . . They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain" (65:25).

If pie-in-the-sky religion is an opiate of the people, keeping them from hoping and working in the face of suffering and injustice, hopelessness is equally, if not more, disabling. Do not, the prophet would say to us, buy into the cynicism that things cannot be any better. Do not just assume that those people, those *other* people, somehow don't know any better, don't want or deserve any better. Consider what God's day, God's desire for you and for them looks like and get to work. Work toward that new day. Let it be the standard, the measure for what ought to be, and do not settle for what merely appeases. What is expedient is not good enough.

**Hope for God's new day calls us to identify with those in need.** As I read Isaiah's words about the infant "that lives but a few days" and "bearing children for calamity," I recalled an article I read in 1981 during my first venture in teaching ethics. The article questioned the high value we as a people supposedly place on children. It pointed out that although we widely proclaim our love for children, the national budgets we draw up as a people paint a different picture. It went on to note the numerous cuts in the budget at that time that were taking away from children such benefits as funding for vaccinations, education and nutrition while leaving other areas untouched. Through that article I first became aware of Marian Wright Edleman and the Children's Defense Fund. I also became aware of the appalling conditions in which so many of the children in our country and world live.

A similar word might be said of the world in which Jesus lived. Hebrew scriptures pronounced children a gift of God, a sign of God's blessing. The promise of children was central to God's covenant with Abraham. Numerous children was a source of great joy, and childlessness was regarded as a curse of God. The Jewish people, however, also existed in the first-century patriarchal Mediterranean world where children, particularly female children occupied the lowest rung of the social ladder in family and society. In contrast to our own ideas of childhood, the number of years for childhood was few. Girls were promised and given in marriage by their mid-teens; boys were allowed only briefly more time. Roman law did not prohibit the exposure of infants, especially females, as a means of ridding a father of an unwanted child. Peasant families, who managed eked out a living with meager or no land holdings, needed children to make up the family's workforce; but economic crises, such as war, drought and possibly divorce, could eventuate in a family's abandoning their children or selling them into slavery.

Jesus, like Isaiah, was mindful of the children borne "for calamity" and responded angrily when his disciples, reflecting the values of the old order, pushed away the children who came to him. "Let them come, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs" (Mark 10:14). Jesus, you see, was doing far more than pronouncing blessing upon a safely removed, romantic notion about the nature of children. He was calling his followers to a higher order. He was, you might say, calling the world that centered around privileged adults and their wants and needs into question. The kingdom of God, God's new day, he was saying, values the small and vulnerable members of society. Children, like the poor, the mournful, the meek, the hungry and the persecuted he blesses in the Beatitudes, are a part of God's new day. "Whoever welcomes one such child," he informs his disciples, "welcomes me and the one who sent me" (9:37). Far from cozying up to the up and coming, he is saying, welcome and serve the child as if you were serving an honored guest in your home. Serving the child, just as serving other vulnerable and powerless members of society, serves God.

So, say what you will. Religion certainly can be a divisive force in society. It can be self-centered, serving and justifying our own selfish purposes. It can be a pie-in-the-sky escape from the realities that haunt our world. If, however, it is truly the religion of the prophets and Jesus, it is about being

fully awake and fully present and fully committed to making the hopeful vision of God's kingdom the standard by which we judge.

If you want to know how we are doing as a nation, look at what is happening among our children. See the child who is coming to school too hungry to learn. See the young man on the street who has had no other positive attention from an adult male in his life than the drug peddler around the corner who wants to groom him for the business. See the one Latino boy out of every six and the one African-American boy out of every three who will be incarcerated. See and feel deeply the loss not only to the child but to our society and world. Do not, however, glimpse the situation and turn away in despair. See and act like a follower of Jesus Christ. See and be aware of those underfunded expenditures for children in our federal, state and community budgets and do everything you can to preserve and strengthen them. See and hear those children's programs in our community seeking volunteers and lend a helping hand.

Several years ago we were a part of a church going through a time of troubling dissension. It was a church we loved, whose fellowship we had embraced, and whose mission we valued and wanted to preserve. In the midst of the struggle a good friend spoke to me of her own hurt and struggle in the face of all that was happening. In the midst of her distress, she came to a decision. "I decided," she told me, "that I was going to be strong;" and that decision made all the difference.

I would suggest to you that the suffering of children and the anxiety afoot in our society, making us turn on one another with such vengeance, is very upsetting. But in the name of the One who embraced the children, I say to myself and to you, "Let us determine that we will be strong." The lives of our children and the well being of our society depend on it. And remember. In embracing the child and her needs, we embrace none other than God and God's good future of hope and justice for all of creation. Let us hope in God's new day; and let us get to work.