

## On the Flip Side

Some of you cats and kitties are hip enough to remember what I mean when I say, “I’ll catch you on the flip side.” Some of you, however, may have forgotten or may simply be too young to know the meaning and origin of that now, alas, archaic phrase. So for those of you who are under 40 or so, here’s a primer. Back in the dark ages, recorded music was available on vinyl platters, much like today’s cds only larger and more fragile. The most popular version of these were played on “record players” at 45 revolutions per minute. These “45 singles” had one song of about 3 to 3 ½ minutes on each side. You could play that song and then literally flip the disc over to the other side to play the other prerecorded music. Generally, the sides were referred to as the “A” side, containing the song the record company thought was going to be a hit, and the “B” side, or the “flip side,” a song that was considered a less “sure thing.” Disc jockeys began to say, “I’ll catch you on the flip side,” meaning that they would speak to the audience again after they’d played both sides of the record. The good folk at NASA picked up this phrase as they said, “see you later” to astronauts orbiting the moon – if you don’t remember, radio communication between the space capsule and the Earth was cut off when the craft was on the far side of the moon. For the astronauts, “Catch you on the flip side,” was the cheery affirmation from the flight controllers that they expected them to emerge unharmed from the communications blackout. “Catch you on the flip side” became common parlance as a farewell among those who were hip.

One of the interesting things about flip sides on 45 records was that the record companies often misjudged their music and their audience and it was actually the flip side that was the more popular song. This gave “catch you on the flip side” another layer of meaning. Not only was it “see you later,” it was also, “things will get better.” So when I began planning this sermon, I thought it would make a nice counterpoint to my sermon about “Horrors and Haints” last week. While last week’s lectionary passages were all about horror stories and the afterlife, the passage I’d already selected out of this week’s lectionary is all about life on a renewed Earth, a life full of homely issues like houses and crops and animals and children, a life which God promises will be full of peace and plenty. I thought we’d go from the *sturm und drang* of the election cycle into a feeling of relief and peace, from “horrors and haints” to the Peaceable Kingdom.

We know now, of course, that anticipation was mistaken. While millions of our fellow citizens are rejoicing, millions are also mourning and fearful of what is to come. And even though our context this morning is quite different from what I expected, the message from Isaiah 65 still pertains, perhaps even more so. Just as with the people to whom this passage was originally addressed, we can receive this word this morning as a badly needed word of hope. It would be dishonest of me to fail to grapple with the grief and fears of so many of our sisters and brothers, neighbors and friends, but I am convinced that the message of God for us this morning is that there will be a flip side full of hope and peace and that it is our calling to continue to work toward that Peaceable Kingdom where God waits with open arms. God, in the words of the hep cats, will catch us on the flip side.

If, like me, you were among the millions who woke up on Wednesday morning stunned by the news from the national elections, you are actually in a position very much like that of those who heard these verses for the first time. This chapter of Isaiah is in the section which most scholars attribute to “Third Isaiah,” a prophet or group of prophets trained in the Isaian tradition who were writing to the people of Judah who had returned from exile in Babylon to the hard work of

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rebuilding Jerusalem and the surrounding country. As I've mentioned before, it was very, very hard work. Not only was it physically hard to rebuild the walls and buildings destroyed by the Babylonians but the returnees faced opposition from political opponents who feared the renewal of an independent Judah, from their historical enemies who had hoped for free reign in the abandoned country, and from those of the remnant left behind by the Babylonians who had taken over farms and buildings in the interim. They also faced internal dissension as some of those who'd come from Babylon wished to give up and go back and others disagreed about priorities in the rebuilding. The audience of Isaiah had expected a glorious homecoming. What they got instead was short rations, hard work, hatred, and trouble.

So you can understand how important it was to them to hear that God, too, was still working. Unlike the translation in our New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the Hebrew text has the same verb form in verses 17 and 18 – “I create,” present tense. God is not planning to create; God is not, as we say in the South, “fixin’ to create;” God is creating now, right alongside the hard working men and women who have come from Babylon to rebuild their ancestral home. And, God promises, when the work is done, it will wipe out all their memories of the hard times. There will be joy and delight, unsullied by sorrow and distress. There will be a flip side.

The details of God's promise are as instructive as the overall hope in the passage. For example, the promise in verse 20 that, “No more shall there be in (Jerusalem) an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.” We are just a few generations removed from high infant mortality rates but it can be easy to forget what family life was like for most of the world before our time. Quoting from ourworldindata.org, Dr. Carla Sunberg, President of Nazarene Theological Seminary, writes on this passage, “It is only in the last one-hundred years that infant mortality has dropped to levels in which the death of a child under five becomes an unusual occurrence. In the United States six children in 1000 will die before they reach the age of five. Until 1750 that number was around 500, and even by 1900 there were still over 200 deaths in 1000 children.” “If you think about it,” she continues, “the number is absolutely staggering and every single family faced death. It was estimated in the early Roman period that each woman would need to give birth to ten children just to keep the population of a city stable.”

Dr. Sunberg also helps us put into perspective the promise that “one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth...” She reminds us that prior to 1930, the average life expectancy was barely over 30. You may remember the philosopher Thomas Hobbes who described human life as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” For Isaiah's audience, the promise of life that extended well past 100 years would have seemed unattainable. But due to improved nutrition and medical advances, by 2010, the world average life expectancy was sixty-seven. Today, in the United States, it is reckoned to be seventy-nine. Actuaries tell us that the first person who will live to 150 has likely been born. In terms of infant mortality and average longevity, the flip side is nearly here.

Isaiah makes some other promises on God's behalf that still seem far in the future even for us; promises of economic and personal security. God says of Judah through Isaiah, “They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build

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and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.” But we have, in very recent days, seen the tragedy of homes and farms foreclosed, when, due to the mendacity of a few, thousands of families have been displaced and lost their means of support. Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Associate Professor of Ethics at Vanderbilt Divinity School, gives the parallel: “*Thou shalt not steal* has come to represent much more than an injunction against specific or individual sinful actions, such as holding up a bank or one-on-one acts of robbery. Rather, it proscribes a broad range of wrongful, communal behavior, along the lines of Rev. Dr. William Buchanan’s sermonic words: ‘Stealing is taking what one did not need, destroying what one no longer needs but could be useful to another, or depriving others in the community of their basic needs.’”

The other promise in this morning’s passage is one that I suspect has always been meant to be understood metaphorically: “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.” It is an image of prelapsarian Eden, the Garden before the Fall. Throughout the foundational tales of Genesis and in the work of all the prophets, we can trace God’s opposition to the violence which human beings perpetrate against each other. Whether it is the blaming behavior of Adam against Eve or the physical violence of Cain versus Abel, the oldest sins of humankind are sins of hurtfulness and destruction. The mythical turns of diet by wolf and lion represent the turn of the human world to true shalom, our rejection of our own fallen nature, “red in tooth and claw.” To the beleaguered and besieged inhabitants of post-exilic Jerusalem, this promise of peace would have been heartening indeed. This flip side is one that they would have prayed for even more fervently than we do today.

So, what about our situation today? How does Third Isaiah speak to us? The great Jewish scholar, Abraham Joshua Heschel, wrote, “The message of (Third) Isaiah, as he is conventionally called, is of no age. It is prophecy tempered with human tears, mixed with a joy that heals all scars, clearing a way for understanding the future in spite of the present. No words have ever gone further in offering comfort when the sick world cries...” Can we resonate, for example, with the promise that God is creating “new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind?” Those of us with a progressive agenda, committed to moving the human experience forward and toward the realization of a new earth, have been confronted this week with the victory of a campaign to return America to an older time, to “make America great again.” Not only are the former things remembered, they are actively sought out. The Trump campaign has been based on a return to a time when White men ruled this country unchallenged, when women, persons of color, and non-heterosexuals knew their place and stayed there – in the kitchen, in the fields, or in the closet. Those who voted for our new President-Elect didn’t want a flip side; they wanted to start the record over in about 1950.

The irony, of course, is that many of those who chose that retrograde path for our country did so out of a desire for positive change for their own lives. They chose as they did because they had been convinced by dishonest and mendacious men that they were suffering because those who weren’t like them were prospering at their expense. They were convinced that in order to succeed they must push others down. It’s a lie as old as humankind: “The woman you gave me, it was her fault... It was the snake, the snake beguiled me.” We must remember, my sisters and my brothers, the words of the Apostle Paul: “...our struggle is not against enemies of blood and

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flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

The results of last week seem to abrogate the vision of the Peaceable Kingdom in other ways as well. We may have advanced in the fight against death, the destroyer of families, in terms of infant mortality and longevity but there are other ways to destroy families. This week, I have read story after story, some from my friends, of families that are terrified that they will be torn from each other. Our Muslim friends fear they will be deported, as do our friends from Latin America. A principal in an elementary school with a population largely made up of immigrants was asked to send a representative to calm the children who were terrified their families would be split up. “Send a white man,” he was asked, “because the children are afraid the mean white man is coming for their parents. They need to be reassured by a white man that not all white men are out to get them.” The situation is even more frightening for refugees from the Syrian war who now believe that their families will not be able to follow them to safety. And I’ve spoken to friends this week who had been living happily in same-sex marriages but now are hearing that those marriages may be legally voided and that all their hard won equalities in benefits may be lost.

When one considers the economic policies which have been touted by the President-Elect, not to mention the way he has conducted his own businesses, it seems very much like the days of unregulated robber barons will return. The new Congress will likely move any protections for consumers against predators in the banking industry far to the back of the legislative queue. We can also look for oil and coal companies to be given free rein to continue to destroy the ancestral homes of the Sioux and the longtime homes of poor Whites in West Virginia and Kentucky. Let me quote again the words of Rev. Dr. William Buchanan: “Stealing is taking what one did not need, destroying what one no longer needs but could be useful to another, or depriving others in the community of their basic needs.”

Finally, in this list of woes, we are already facing an increase of incidents of violence toward the vulnerable in our society. Some of the violence is verbal. I read with horror this week the Facebook post of a friend whose daughter was approached in a parking lot by a man wearing a cap reading “Make America Great Again.” He leered at her and said “Who owns your (crude word for female genitalia) now, (crude word for a female dog)?” On American college campuses, black students are being told to “go back to Africa” or to “go back to the fields.” Some of the violence is physical. Law enforcement is reporting that this year of the campaign has seen more violence against Muslims than any year since the 9/11 tragedy. Again, women, people of color, and non-heterosexuals are being singled out for abuse and they are terrified. They aren’t seeing much promise of the flip side.

Nevertheless, I am convinced that the flip side is coming. I am convinced, first of all, because God has promised it. God’s promises to the people of Judah are still valid. We don’t know when the record will be flipped to the new heaven and the new earth but we know that it will come. As Stacey Floyd-Thomas writes, “According to Michael Thompson, the point of this biblical text is that the Lord will refashion a creation for the faithful in which all things—absolutely everything—will be made new. No longer will the ruling class elite own the majority of the world’s wealth. No longer will the genius of the masses become the capital of the rich

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minority. No longer will the poor be those who work and the rich those who enslave others to do their work.” And despite our fears and our sorrow about what the last several months have issued in and what is still to come, there are signs of hope all around us. My friend Hannah McMahan, executive director of the New Baptist Covenant which brings Black Baptists and Euro Baptists together for social justice work, sent an e-mail yesterday morning that had this good news: “In my time at New Baptist Covenant, I have seen rifts 7 generations old beginning to heal when partners come together, practice courageous listening and work side by side for justice... This year has been a great year of growth for us. We have over 220 churches under covenant partnerships, hundreds of pastors working and over 72,000 congregants engaged.” Words of hope that the coming of God’s flip side is getting closer regardless of hate and intolerance.

But to truly hope, we must work toward our hope. I received another e-mail from another colleague this week. Rev. Dr. Debora Jackson, executive director of the ABC-USA Ministers Council, sent a reminder to the membership of that organization, membership composed of those of us in the professional clergy. But I’m claiming her words for all of us, since we are, as our bulletin reminds us each week, all ministers of the Good News. Here’s what she wrote and I hope you all will accept her challenge. She began by quoting II Corinthians 4:1, “Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.” She continued:

“To the Ministers of the New Covenant, each of you upon whom God has called. To you, the Ministers of Reconciliation, those whom God has reconciled so that you too could be reconcilers.

I could not allow this day to end without a word to you. Perhaps you woke this morning in shock. I know I did. But God is an ever-present help in the time of trouble and this morning, God's Spirit led me to 2 Corinthians 4. I might have started the day feeling discouraged and empty, but I knew that I could not end the day this same way.

You see I know that it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry. We cannot lose heart. There is a world that needs to hear from us.

I think of our brothers and sisters who voted out of despair for a system that has left them behind. They need to hear from us.

I think of our brothers and sisters who did not vote because they despaired that their vote did not matter. They need to hear from us.

I think of our brothers and sisters who are in this country illegally, who now fear an unknown future. They need to hear from us.

I think of our brothers and sisters who are of different faith traditions, who have been singled out and targeted because of their faith. They need to hear from us.

I think of our brothers and sisters of color who fear the backward march of progress. They need to hear from us.

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I think of our brothers and sisters in the majority who are bearing with us the weight and pain. They need to hear from us.

I think of our brothers and sisters who are persecuted because of who they love and the uncertainty for their future. They need to hear from us.

I think of our children who will suffer the consequences of what has been decided for generations to come. They need to hear from us.

In short, the world needs to hear from us - the ministers of the new covenant, the ministers of reconciliation, the repairers of the breach. There is a chasm-sized breach in the wall and we are all needed for the repair. We start the work of repair by reaching out in love, by offering support, and then sharing the grace and compassion that has been given to us by God through Jesus Christ. We are all needed. The world needs us and we need the Lord like never before.

So press on ministers of the gospel. My prayer is that this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure. Don't lose heart."

And now, I say to you, my sisters and my brothers, don't lose heart. Carry the good news of God's love and forgiveness out into the world. Carry within you the message of Jesus who said, "Pray for those who mistreat you," and the message of his brother, James, who said, "True religion is to care for the vulnerable." Carry with you the fiery strength of the Holy Spirit and also the dove-like gentleness of the Holy Spirit. Don't lose heart. God has brought us safe thus far and God will lead us home. God will catch us on the flip side. Amen.