

# IN REMEMBRANCE OF HIS MERCY

*Rev Jim Allan  
Camrose United Church  
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Isaiah 35: 1-10 - The desert shall rejoice and bloom

Hymn 23 - Joy shall come

Luke 1: 47-55 - My soul magnifies the Lord

Isaiah's words are some of the greatest and, you know, they have been heard for 3,000 years. Isn't that amazing? For 3,000 years those words have spoken to the spirits and the hearts of people, and here is this marvellous vision of the heart of life that declares "here's God, here's a sacred moment in which the eyes of the blind are opened, the ears of the deaf are unstopped, the lame leap like deer." Here are these wonderful images of water that flows in the desert, and the beautiful and delicate flowers that bloom in the dry places. These words speak of a time, but also of an energy, a potential.

I think one of the greatest privileges of ministry is to have studied a little bit, just a smattering, of the Hebrew language because it contains such richness; it's so different from English and from the way we think. The Hebrew language reflects a culture, and the verbs are different from what they are in English. In English the verbs are rigidly tied to temporal relationship. That is, we think of them as past tense or present tense or future tense, and we throw everything into those categories. But in Hebrew there isn't really a future or past tense. There's passive and active voice, and there's perfect and imperfect tense. Some verbs have a sense of completeness, whereas others have a sense of something that's in process. Although there are not past and future tenses we must, of course, translate verbs into English in terms of past and future. And so translation emerges with too much emphasis on this sort of crystal ball gazing--looking at the future when Isaiah says things such as we have in today's reading.

Isaiah's words are not primarily a prediction of the future that our mentality interprets them to be. Rather, they are more of a sense of seeing the potential, of saying that when such and such happens in this kind of moment, in this kind of circumstance, then the lame walk, the blind see, and so on. Now he could be talking about something in the past, something in the future, or something in the present moment, but that doesn't matter. The point is he's not talking about a linear, chronological, thing. He's talking about the potential and the power that is in life. A prophet is one who can see and hear the sacred presence in life, who can look into the ordinary things of every day and discern the sacred presence that is there. And so when he talks, as Isaiah does, he is talking about things that are far beyond what we can imagine. He's not talking about some silly supernaturalism as if it were some kind of magical thing that is going to happen despite the laws of nature--that breaking the laws of nature proves a miracle. That is a simplistic, modernistic way of thinking in the post-scientific era that wouldn't make sense to a person even in Isaiah's time. The idea of reality being divided between natural and supernatural was a much later invention.

Isaiah is talking poetically. He's talking about how the power of God works in the world, and he's using all these beautiful images as metaphors, as poetry, to describe the wonderful power of God's presence in the world. He's not talking about that power as some kind of cerebral, doctrinal belief which is another way we have truncated and cheapened this religious tradition that we have. Rather, he's talking about something that he can see and feel and experience. He's talking from the experience of looking at, and sensing, life. Wordsworth's hymns say despair is not the last word; in a deeper place there is a power, a power that we see, that we feel, when that Christmas bell rings or when any of ten thousand other things happen, that suddenly open the eyes of our souls and we see what God is about in the world.

We need to be taking this seriously and thinking about it because, otherwise, we are leaving our faith in the dust of a mythological past and letting it die in the midst of a world of people who desperately need our faith. And so we need to be doing some serious theological rethinking of our faith tradition. On this particular subject, John Spong--one of those very brilliant and compassionate modern theologians who are really stretching the edge of our thinking--says "this biblical story about a perfect creation from which humanity fell into sin is pre-Darwinian mythology and post-Darwinian nonsense."<sup>1</sup> You see what Spong is doing. He is looking at the things that have happened in the modern era--by that I mean the last two or three centuries--that have rocked the classic formulation of Christian faith, the things that are reasons for people drifting away from a church that hasn't rethought its faith in relation to the events that have challenged our faith in our time.

The challenge of Darwin dispels this myth of some perfection, some utopian ideal, that existed at the beginning; and the myth that all we need to do is get back to that original perfection. Darwin introduces the idea of evolution. I spoke a couple of weeks ago about Process Theology, the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, and theologians like John Cobb, who have forged a theological direction that takes us beyond Darwin, beyond the challenges to Christian faith that Darwin presents. In a way, Darwin gives us evolution as a biological principle; process theologians give us evolution as a theological, philosophical, principle that says we're not trying to restore some pristine perfection of the past, let alone trying to achieve some kind of moral perfection such that if we're all good enough the world will turn out right, and certainly not just a passive sort of waiting for it all to end. Rather, according to the process theologians, we're living in a world in which the sacred is acting, is present, is growing, is something brand new that's never been before. It's not just a doctrinal belief; it's the promise that we feel and we sense when we really see into the heart of life.

Let me give you an example. I'm wearing my Beads of Hope pins here today because the Beads of Hope campaign has just ended. (These little beaded pins were made by women in South Africa and Zambia.) That campaign went on for two years. The goal was to raise a million dollars, and they raised two million; as a matter of fact, they raised it all in the first year. Petitions were presented to the government to respond more fully to the pandemic that is Aids. Our Moderator made the following statement in

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<sup>1</sup> John S. Spong, *A Call for a New Reformation*, <http://www.dioceseofnewark.org/jsspong/reform.html>.

a press release this past week. “With this story we wish to express our deepest appreciation to everyone in the church for their tremendous support for this major initiative. During worship at Church House chapel this morning the comment was made that few projects have captured the church like this one.”<sup>2</sup> The success of that campaign is another of those exciting flashes of sacred power at work in the world. Something happens. What is it about this issue that drew people together, not just among churches but beyond churches, worldwide, into an outpouring of compassionate response? What is it? We must not just shrug our shoulders and say “wasn’t that nice.” It’s very important that we acknowledge that this is God doing something--not just doing something to solve the Aids problem, but doing something to wake us up, to dazzle our eyes and to show us what is real. “Real” is not the greed and fear that drives wars and violence, the fools who can see no other way. Here is what is real.

One of the things that strikes me about the whole issue of Aids, that I think captures our attention, is innocent suffering. We didn’t see innocent suffering at first. Aids has gone through several phases. I remember years ago when it was first breaking out and was associated with homosexual promiscuity. I remember people in my own congregation, whom I had known to be very faithful and compassionate people, saying to me “That must be God’s punishment for homosexuals for all that promiscuity.” And I couldn’t believe the depth of hatred that I heard in those voices. I think the energy of God’s presence has pushed us through that stage; and through the apathy that’s our natural response, not because we don’t care but because the suffering is so great that our hearts numb because we can’t face the situation. It has pushed us from thinking “Oh, that’s some unfortunate thing happening over in Africa; thank goodness it’s not happening here,” to opening our eyes and realizing that we’re facing a global pandemic which will be here as well. God’s presence pushes us through all of those ways in which we resist it.

What is it that pushes us through? What’s the force, what’s the energy, that takes us through all those barriers to the kind of response that there has been to the Beads of Hope campaign? I think that, when we look closely enough, we see the suffering of innocent people. Now of course they are the children, the thousands of orphans, but it’s more than that. Even when we think it’s sexual promiscuity that spreads Aids, that the people who are dying of this disease are not perfect people, are not innocent people, we can’t sit back smugly and say that someone who has died of Aids deserved it. These victims are innocent people in the sense that no one, no nation, no people, no world, deserves this kind of suffering. God drags us, pulls us, through all of that hatred and ignorance to feel the power of the innocent suffering.

God’s power can transform our hearts, and that’s the essence of the Easter story of the Passion of the Christ--the innocence and the suffering. And so Mary sings this marvellous song “Magnificat”--My Soul Praises God--because she senses that what is happening here in this birth of the Christ child is the sacred in remembrance of mercy. Isn’t that a marvellous phrase? “The remembrance of his mercy.” What is mercy? Mercy is God’s offer to the world that things needn’t always be the way they have always

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Short, Moderator, and Jim Sinclair, General Secretary, General Council, United Church of Canada, “Message from Moderator and General Secretary”, 2004 Dec 1.

been. Our despair emanates from looking at a world in which there are so many centuries of hatred and war and brokenness and just plain foolishness. How can we ever step beyond that? We look at the Middle East and we see nations, peoples, who are loving, faithful, spiritual people like you and I, but who have grown up for generations learning to hate each other. And we ask “how can that ever be healed; it has always been like that and it always will be.” But that’s the language of despair. There is God’s remembrance of mercy. The message is “mercy,” that word from the sacred that says nothing has to always continue the way it has always been, because there is a sacred energy and presence at the heart of life that is always there and working. All we have to do is learn how to pay attention to it, how to recognize that that’s the truth and the rest is lies, and how to find within our own hearts the courage to stand up and proclaim that aloud no matter where we hear the lies. All we have to do is keep on telling the truth.

Years ago I was involved in peace-making with Jim Douglas at the Bangor Center in Washington where submarines were deployed carrying nuclear bombs all over the ocean. Douglas was inspired by Ghandi’s non-violent resistance and a concept called *satyagriha* in Sanskrit which, roughly translated into English, means “truth power.” It is the idea that truth has a power of its own and is the greatest power in the world. We don’t need to do something, fix something, change something; all we need to do is find the courage to open our eyes and see what the truth really is, say it out loud, and proclaim the remembrance of the sacred mercy.

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