

HOPE FOR A HOME
Third Sunday of Advent¹
Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road / Plymouth, MI 48170
Royce Dickinson, Jr. / 12.12.2004

In the 1982 Star Trek movie *The Wrath of Khan*, the USS Reliant is on assignment searching for lifeless planets as potential test sites for the top secret Genesis Project. The Genesis Project is really a Genesis torpedo, a device that will, when fired on a lifeless planet, restructure it into a lush, life-supporting world ready for colonization. Kahn, however, is interested in the Genesis torpedo as a weapon. Although Genesis is capable of creating life from lifelessness, its detonation would destroy anything already living. It would bring a dead planet to life, but it would kill a living planet. Upon the explosion of the USS Reliant, which has been hijacked by Khan, the full Genesis effect is initiated on the planet Regula.

In *The Search for Spock*, the 1984 Star Trek sequel, the Klingons travel to Regula—the Genesis planet—to investigate the Genesis device’s potential as a weapon. Among other discoveries, it is revealed that some shortcuts were taken with the development of Genesis, resulting in the abnormalities and instability of the planet Regula.

Whether or not the Genesis project was ultimately a failure is not the question I wish to answer. I want to imagine how wonderful it would be to have a device that could restructure the world—to imagine a power capable of replacing the old with the new, of bringing life out of death, of transforming the world into a Genesis Garden of Eden. I want to imagine God’s “Genesis Project” that created the world being unleashed again to recreate the world. That’s the “Genesis Project” the prophet Isaiah depicts in Isaiah 35.

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.

¹ Isa 35:1-10; Ps 146:5-10 or Luke 1:47-55; Jas 5:7-10; Matt 11:2-11.

They shall see the glory of the LORD,
the majesty of our God.

Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
“Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.”

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God’s people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.
No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
And the ransomed of the LORD shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away
(Isa 35:1-10, NRSV).

God’s Old Testament people, whether in the eighth century or the sixth century; whether before, during, or after the Babylonian exile; God’s people certainly lived between the extremes of hope and despair. With every new king, hopes were rekindled for a king like David. With the end of David’s dynasty and the exile to Babylon, such hopes seemed dashed once and for all. The return from Babylon, to which Isaiah chapter

35 speaks,² no doubt raised hopes and joyful anticipation anew, but these hopes and joys were lowered again and again by unfulfilled expectations.

Waiting has never been easy. Just ask your children. They can't wait until Christmas gets here. Waiting is not easy, especially when our expectations are so great. And waiting may be particularly difficult for the people of God. We declare to the world that our God is in control, but time and time again the condition of the world seems to deny our declaration. And so we wait. We wait and we wait for God to ultimately reveal Himself as the sovereign king we say He is. Waiting is hard and it is especially hard on our hopes. That is what the Advent season is all about: it's about learning to wait with hope.

“This world is not my home, I'm just a passing thru”—a familiar line from a favorite hymn. On the one hand, as Christians, we do not want to become so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good; but on the other hand, we realize that this world—as it now is—is not our ultimate home. We hope for a home, for a new world where God reigns and where His reign is not challenged. As Christians, our hope is to be distinguished from the pessimism that believes nothing can change, and our hope it is to be distinguished from the optimism that believes we ourselves will bring about this new world order. We must neither give up nor think we are self-sufficient. Because our hope is in God, we believe that in the present “This Is My Father's World,” and we believe that in the future “the kingdom of this world” will be “the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ.”³

I toyed with the idea of having Jim lead the song “This Is My Father's World,”⁴ followed immediately with the song “This World Is Not My Home.”⁵ So which is it? Is this my Father's world? Or is this world not my home? The answer: “yes”—both are true. This *is* my Father's world, *and* my Father *is* going to transform it into my eternal home. That is God's “Genesis Project,” and that is Isaiah's vision of hope.

The center of Isaiah's psalm is verses 3 and 4:

²So also do chapters 40ff.

³Rev 11:15.

⁴Lyrics by Maltbie D. Babcock (1901); music by Franklin L. Sheppard (1915).

⁵Traditional lyrics; arranged by A. H. Howard (1992).

Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
“Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.”

The reason to exhort and to encourage God’s people “to be strong and do not fear” is that “your God will come—He will come and save you.” But there is a problem with our English translations. Not that the translations are bad, but that the English terms used tend to conjure up bad ideas. “Vengeance” and “recompense” are not exactly comforting or even comfortable words. To say God is coming “with vengeance and terrible recompense,” sounds far more scary than it does soothing. “Vengeance” and “recompense” seemed to depict a rather frightening God, yet we are told, “do not fear.” The underlying Hebrew words indicate justice and the proper work of God to do what is good and right, including vindication for His people. Of course, when God does what is good and right for His people, things will not go well for God’s enemies. Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* reads:

Energize the limp hands,
strengthen the rubbery knees.
Tell fearful souls,
“Courage! Take heart!
GOD is here, right here,
on his way to put things right
And redress all wrongs.
He’s on his way! He’ll save you!”

If verses 3 and 4 are the center of Isaiah’s poem, verses 8 through 10 are the climax.

A highway⁶ shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God’s people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.
No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;

⁶In the context of Old Testament history, this is the highway back from exile, the second exodus through the wilderness, that will be much more a superhighway than a circuitous way of wandering as was the first exodus. Cf. Isa 40:3-5.

they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
And the ransomed of the LORD shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Isaiah envisions all of creation, all the creatures, in religious pilgrimage—the blind, deaf, dumb, and lame—but also crocuses, grass, and jackals. All are alike. All have in common the new gift of life. All of creation, human and nonhuman, are gathered together in thanksgiving and singing and rejoicing.

In Isaiah 35, the situations of humanity and creation are identical. Both are in pitiful condition, both desperately yearn for rescue, both are incapable of saving themselves. And yet, the joy of Isaiah 35 is overwhelming, starting with the restoration and renewal of creation and continuing to the ransom and redemption of the people of God. The reason for such joy is clear: “your God will come.” No matter how dismal the helplessness or how dark the hopelessness, there is courage and joy in knowing that God will not forsake His people. Jesus Himself appealed to this text in response to the question from John the Baptist as to whether Jesus was truly the Messiah or not. The healing miracles of Jesus are seen as signs that Isaiah 35 was being fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth.⁷

Our reading of this text must not tone down or apologize for the way it loses itself in joy. These words are a healing alternative to the church’s grim despair and to our modern thinking that no real newness is possible. These words invite us to rise above our monotonous rationality to affirm that God does what the world believes is not possible. That’s what Advent is all about: It’s getting ready for the time when God will do the impossible!

“The opposite of joy,” said Leslie Weatherhead, “is not sorrow. It is unbelief.” Are you ready for the impossible?

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⁷See Matt 11:2-6; Luke 7:18-23.