Few people connect with God like Isaiah. The prophet experienced several extraordinary visions. Like Francis of Assisi and the Christian mystics who came much later, Isaiah had the unique ability to tap into God’s dreams for the world and divulge them to people of faith. Painting vivid scenes with his poetry, he helped people grasp God’s longings for the world.

He shared God’s ideal of a harmonious creation when he wrote, “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid. (Isaiah 11:6) He shared God’s vision of a world at peace when he prophesied. “They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning-hooks.” (Isaiah 2:4) Isaiah channeled God’s Spirit and revealed powerful images so that we could picture the future God expects us to strive toward. Without divine intermediaries, we would have to make up the rules ourselves, and whenever humans make up the rules, things go badly for everyone except those who make the rules.

In this morning’s vision, Isaiah’s poetry throws paint on a canvass that depicts sweltering, arid land bursting with blooms like a bountiful garden. He writes, “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.”

However, we must step back into the previous chapter to fully fathom this scene. In the previous chapter, Isaiah’s vision was that the people were doomed. The land was soaked with blood; the streams and the soil were poisoned. Thorns grew over their strongholds and thistles covered their fortresses. Isaiah’s painting was one of utter despair.

It was an accurate picture of what happened to the Hebrew people. The ancient Israelites were divided into northern and southern kingdoms. The northern kingdom was demolished and the people in the southern kingdom were taken into exile in Babylon.

In the ancient world, if a nation was conquered, the people would either die or become assimilated into the victorious nation. The Hebrew people were facing this prospect. They were at the point of being erased from history.

A colleague tells what happened to his close friend when he was a student at Northwestern. His friend took a train into Chicago “to hear his teacher play with the Chicago Symphony. Following the concert, he was invited backstage to meet members of the symphony, and then he was asked to come along when a group went out to celebrate. It was a stimulating evening. On his way home, he was reliving the thrills of the night. It was late and the train car he was riding in was completely empty, but it was full of his excitement and his hope – perhaps he
would one day play with the symphony. He felt as if a grand future stretched out before him. Then the train made a stop, and someone boarded the car at the door behind him. That person walked the length of the car and sat down directly behind him. Immediately all thoughts of what might be flew out of his heart, and his stomach plunged. His only thought was, ‘I'll never even get back to Evanston.'”

There are moments in life when joy can switch to fear in a flash – the breakup of a marriage, the loss of a job, dire results of a pathology report, the death of a loved one. Isaiah’s vision of a doomed people whose land is destroyed is apt for such moments.

However, it was at the point when all seemed lost, when the people were in despair and the future obliterated, that Isaiah had his vision that we read this morning. “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom.”

But Isaiah does not stop there. He does not simply hold up a hopeful vision of new life where it seems there is only death. He calls on the people to be strong and courageous because God is with them.

He says, “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.’”

Isaiah continues, “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.” To defeated people who could not see beyond the nightmare they were living, Isaiah disclosed an astonishing dream.

But I wonder how many in Isaiah’s original audience cursed him. There must have been plenty of skeptics who scoffed at his vision. “Look around Isaiah. Our army has been crushed, our homes have been plundered, and our fields have been destroyed. It’s over, Isaiah!”

When life turns bitter, hearing someone speak words of joy can ignite resentment. I remember a time when everything in my life seemed to be crashing. I was sad and angry and confused. The future was frightening because I knew that my bleak situation was only going to get worse. I remember being invited to a cocktail party that I did not want to attend but felt obligated to make an appearance. People were enjoying themselves and laughing, and I resented it. I felt like screaming, “How can you enjoy yourselves, don’t you know that there are people who are hurting!”

Later I realized how sour I had become. I had been dealt an injustice and was feeling wounded, and I wanted everyone else to feel the pain I was feeling. Eventually it dawned on me how self-centered I was being, and that dragging everyone else down was not going to improve my outlook or boost my spirits. I began to realize that even in the midst of gloom – especially in the midst of gloom – we need to experience joy. Even if I could not blot out my sadness, moments of joy provided a temporary escape from the pain and made life more bearable until I had worked my way through the lowest point of my grief.

When Isaiah shared his vision with the people, there must have been plenty who wanted to muzzle him. The evidence was overwhelming. The desert was dry and barren; not a single crocus was showing its head.

However, history proved the naysayers wrong. Despite the long odds, those who embraced Isaiah’s vision of new life saw their dreams fulfilled. The people were liberated, they returned to Jerusalem, and they rebuilt their lives.

Biblical scholar, Patricia Tull points out that “This story of the Hebrew people’s historic resurrection is central to both Jewish and Christian faith. Neither Jews nor Christians would exist today had this not occurred.”
Isaiah’s vision is not limited to ancient times. It serves as a timeless message of hope to all people of faith because God always seeks to lead us to a better day.

If you choose to be cynical, you can stack up mountains of evidence. There are plenty of reasons for despairing about the future. Loved ones die and so do we. Family can disappoint and friends can betray. Racism is on the rise. Large swaths of our country are enamored with guns. Drugs destroy individuals and neighborhoods.

God neither determines the course of our lives nor the events of the world. God reveals the divine dream of what the world can become. Then, we are free to make choices that move us closer to God’s dream or further away from it. God calls, urges, and challenges us to lean into a new future whose foundations are Compassion, Beauty, Justice and Peace. God whispers in our depths of new possibilities for transforming our lives and transforming our world, but we must strengthen our weak hands and make firm our feeble knees.

I drove past a vacant lot in a run-down part of town. There were high weeds, liquor bottles, plastic bags and crack vials. It was disgusting and hopeless.

I drove by the same lot again and I saw a community garden with tomato plants, lettuce, squash, and flowers. People of all ages, races and religions were weeding and watering. There was laughter and music and singing. It was quite a vision.

What do you see these days? What vision of the future is calling out to you?

NOTE


[For the curious, nothing happened to the young man on the train. He made it back.]

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of all creation — who ordered the swirling chaos and stretched out the heavens like a curtain; who sculpted the mountains and filled the earth with good things — you hold all life in your hand.

We can scarcely believe that You — Lord of the cosmos — became flesh and lived among us! Yet, so great is your love for us that you entered into our brokenness. We rejoice that the One-in-whom-your-fullness-dwells drew near to us as a babe in a manger, that we might know justice, and peace, and wholeness.

During this Advent season, we wait for you to draw near to us again, and we watch for glimpses of your new creation. We watch for the day when nations will beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks; when the wolf will live with the lamb; when the desert will rejoice and blossom. We long for the day when weak hands are made strong and feeble knees become firm …

For many of us it is hard to await your coming with hope and joy, for there is so much that defies your vision for creation … In this time of gathering darkness, when day fades quickly into night and the shadows of despair descend upon many, we seek your light in every corner of our world:

Send your hope upon those who are weighed down by injustice or weary from grief. Send your peace upon neighborhoods torn by violence and communities embroiled in conflict. Send your joy into hearts that are broken or lonely, and your love upon those in need of compassion. Fill each of us with your hope, your peace, your joy,
and your love that we might bear witness to the one who comes, who is the light of the world. Give us courage to carry Christ’s light into the world, until sorrow and sighing flee away and every parched place breaks forth in song.

We pray trusting that you are the one who wipes away every tear, who comes to set your people free. So, with the confidence of your children, we pray as Christ taught us: **Our Father...**