



“Living Into the Vision”

***The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring
Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California***

***November 18, 2007
Isaiah 65:17-25 (NRSV)***

What’s your optimism quotient? How optimistic of a person are you? Do you tend to have a more positive, or a more negative outlook on life? Is your glass half-full or half-empty? How optimistic are you, for example, about your financial future, and does your level of optimism affect your net worth?

Two Duke University finance professors recently set out to answer these questions about the relationship between optimism and success in the stock market. Their research project and results were covered in an article for a scientific periodical called “LiveScience” that was published this past week. According to the reporter who covered the project, the researchers, Drs. Manju Puri and David Robinson, compared statistical and self-reported life expectancies to determine their research subjects’ levels of optimism.

The professors’ findings suggest that there is a strong correlation between investor optimism and stock market earnings, but as with many good things in life, the Duke duo concluded that optimism is best in moderation—at least with regard to stock market results.¹ Because, as the reporter summarizes, “People who have a rosy outlook are more likely than others to make prudent financial decisions, but those who are extreme optimists make riskier investments and save less money than others...”²

I do not claim to be a financial wiz, but I have been to enough pension seminars to know that historically the stock market has been a reliable and more lucrative revenue source for long-term investors than most conventional investment vehicles. So it doesn’t strike me as rocket science that people who are generally positive and who stay in the market for the long haul are rewarded for their vigilance. Likewise, it’s no surprise to me that plenty of daytraders and hedge fund investors have “lost their shirts” in the market. As mother always said, “If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.”

¹ Jenna Bryner, *The Downside of Optimism* in “LiveScience,” Tuesday, November 12, 2007.

² Ibid.

II

Like the Duke professors who conducted this study on the correlation between optimism and investor results, I am fascinated by the relationship between one's outlook on life and the results we experience. Studies such as the Duke project demonstrate that there is a strong correlation between moderate optimism and positive portfolio performances.

The children's comments during the Children's Gathering last Sunday offer another example of the correlation between expectations and outcomes. I particularly remember that Kern quoted his math teacher's poster about the relationship between expectations and outcomes in math class. The poster said something like this: "Whether you think you can or you can't, you're right."

Some prominent preachers have emphasized the importance of optimism. When I was Kern's age and stuck at home recovering from knee surgeries, my only worship option was watching the Crystal Cathedral on Channel 9 out of Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

Robert Schuler's "power of positive thinking" didn't hurt me, but it didn't help either. At the age of 16, I found Schuler's platitudes to be theologically thin. Twenty-eight years and three theological degrees later, I am even less impressed with Schuler's theology, and with pastoral approaches that fail to plumb the spiritual depths where human hunger for hope is bred.

As a pastor, what really rocks my world isn't optimism. It isn't the power of positive thinking. It's real, live hope. I am especially intrigued and stirred by the evidence of hope that I find in scripture, and in individuals and communities who thrive in and in spite of living in less than hopeful times.

I wonder, "Where does their hope come from?" "How could I (how could we) feel this sense of hope?" And, "how could I/we help others experience life-transforming hope, particularly in grim circumstances?" These questions, for me, are some of the great queries of the Christian life.

III

Today's Hebrew Bible reading offers a wonderful case study of the kind of hope that I'm talking about. The prophet Isaiah's message was uttered in the grimmest of times in Israel's history. It was uttered by a prophet speaking to a people who were living in Babylonian captivity. There was hardly a person alive who had been born before exile, so that virtually no one would have known the way home, even if they had been released the very day that Isaiah had uttered his prophecy.

At the time of Isaiah's prophecy, the nation of Israel lay in ruins. The Temple at Jerusalem was a shambles. The homes to which these exiles might return had

been vacant for two generations. Their families' vineyards and fields had gone wild, and their orchards would have only been good for firewood.

Knowing the exilic context into which Isaiah uttered his prophecy, imagine hearing his vision of a new heaven and a new earth come on earth, in your life time. Imagine being an exile in Babylon, and hearing the prophet's words, and trying to believe that they were meant for you, for your family, your people—in your life time.

If Duke University had been around in those days and had professors cranking out research projects on optimism, their scholars probably would have cautioned the exiles about being too optimistic—but as we learn from scripture, there's a difference between optimism and hope.

Optimism is “a tendency to expect the best possible outcome.”³ But hope is different. **Hope**, particularly in the biblical sense, is, according to Old Testament professor Walter Brueggemann, the memory of what God has already done, and a trust that God will continue to act in life-transforming ways in the future.⁴

Hope is not based on false promises, like a family member who swears that they will stop drinking or drugging; that they'll get a job next week; or that they'll stop the cycle of family violence—but never does. Hope is not based on false promises.

Hope—as illustrated in the Bible—is grounded in the memory of what God has already done for God's people. Grim as things were in exilic Babylon, Israel had a memory of God adopting their ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, when they were foreigners and aliens. Israel had a memory of God leading their ancestors from slavery in Egypt into the Promised Land. Israel had a memory of God renewing the Covenant at Sinai, even though their ancestors had broken it. Israel had a memory of God's life-transforming work in the past, and they trusted that what God had done before, God could and would do for them in the future.

Yes, the exiles lived in grim times, but they had hope—life-transforming hope. They had a memory of what God had done, and a trust that God could and would fulfill prophetic promises. Israel had hope, and they lived into the vision that Isaiah proclaimed.

³ William Morris, ed., *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language: New College Edition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), p. 922.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Hope within History* (Louisville: John Knox, 1987).

IV

We are heirs to this same hope. This promise that Isaiah made to our ancestors in the faith is meant for us and for all people. So we have reason to hope.

The great faith question of our time, then, is not whether the future is hopeful, but whether we will accept God's invitation to embrace the prophet's vision and live into it.

As we approach the holidays, the contrast between things as they are and things as they should be is often heightened. This dismal War in Iraq drones on as more and more innocent people die, and our armed services members anticipate yet another holiday season away from their families. The cost of the War continues to drag down the federal budget as social service dollars are diverted to the Pentagon, and the news of a national economic downturn fills our daily headlines. At the same time, some of us struggle with our own personal sense of loss and family difficulties. Negative thoughts and feelings abound. Our world may not be what it used to be, or how we would like it to be.

It would be easy to join the chorus of doom and gloom that is sung around us; but our faith compels us to sing a prophetic song of hope. And what of our hope? Our hope is based on something more than military results, the value of our stock market portfolios, or our personal or familial happiness quotients.

As spiritual descendants of the exiles, and heirs to the prophetic promise of Isaiah, we dare to announce that we live in blessed times. We dare to proclaim with the prophet that God is already bringing about the profound transformation that we need in our lives and our world.

This hope which we have is not some pie-in-the-sky fantasy. It is the memory of what God has already done, and a trust that God will continue to act in life-transforming ways in the future—even if we cannot fully imagine that future.

V

To experience this hope-filled future, we must take a few pages from Israel's "play book." For all of you football fans in the congregation—and even those who are less enamored of the sport—what follows is a description of three plays that I suggest we take so that we might live into God's vision of a new heaven and a new earth.

*Play #1: Recall and act on the importance of **solidarity** with one another in the struggle, both spiritual and existential.*

Today I want us to practice what I'm preaching about, so I have a little gift to present to Dick Duey. Most of you know that our wonderful Dick Duey has been living with cancer for three years. He's not feeling too well these days, and I

think he could use a reminder of our support and solidarity. Dick is a big football fan, and a former player on the UC Berkley 1959 Rose Bowl team. So today, as a symbol of our solidarity with Dick, I want to encourage us to sign this football for him which says, "Dick's Team" and "Eden Church," so that he can keep this with him as a reminder of our love for him, and as a symbol of our solidarity with him and his family in these difficult times.

Play #1 is the solidarity play.

Play #2 for living into God's hope-filled future involves telling and retelling the stories of how we've overcome adversity, and teaching them to our children.

Israel did this time and again. The Israelites were a story-telling people who knew that their story was bound up in God's story.

Our culture has become so high tech that we have nearly lost the practice of face-to-face storytelling, but we must reclaim it. We must reclaim the art and practice of storytelling.

This past week I was talking with the Tylers about a family history project that Maya and Sage and all of our Middle School students are working on these days. It's a great project, which requires the kids to interview their parents and grandparents, to look at photo albums, to visit sites that have family significance, and, in the process, to tell and listen to a lot of family stories.

As a child, I remember that storms were often times that storytelling took place. In the winter when blizzards or ice storms would leave us without lights, my sister and I would complain saying, "What are we going to do without TV?" My dad's reply was simply, "I think we're just going to have to talk to each other." And we did. And out would come these amazing stories from my father's childhood about winter storms on our family farm, and farming with horse-drawn equipment in the days before electricity and fuel-powered implements.

Other ways that we keep stories alive—especially stories about overcoming adversity—are through folk art, like Hmong story panels, and Irish folk songs. Today in the workshop that I'm leading with the Guier family, Holly Guier's going to demonstrate another way of keeping storytelling alive in our families, through scrapbooking.

The forms our stories will take and the forums which evoke them may vary; but the importance of storytelling remains a constant for all of us. Because it is through our storytelling that our faith stories emerge, and it is through telling and hearing these stories that our faith becomes more resilient and life-sustaining for all of us.

Remember, play #2 is the story-telling play.

Play #3 involves the practice of prophetic imagination.

Like Isaiah we must imagine a world beyond whatever veil of tears we may now endure. Let us imagine this world, and as we imagine it, let us discern the steps that we must take to live into the hope-filled vision that God has in store for us.

This third play, this "imagination play," seems a lot like an "option play" in football, in that the results aren't predetermined. The linemen have to do their

part, so that the quarterback has time to read the situation, and chose the option that seems most successful for the team. Then the rest of the players must respond to the quarterback's moves in ways that ensure the most successful result.

Because the option play is fluid, practice is even more important. Through practice our bodies develop a visceral memory of what to do in real-life (game day) situations. That's play #3, the imagination play.

Now that I've described each of the plays, let's have a review of all three: play #1 is the solidarity play. Play #2 is the story-telling play. And, play #3 is the option play. Remember, our job is to keep solidarity with each other, to tell and retell the stories about how we've overcome adversity, and to pay attention to the field and choose the best option presented and work together for the most hopeful result.

If we execute these three plays as described, we will discover that Isaiah's vision isn't just beautiful poetry. It isn't just a beautiful dream. It's a vision that Israel lived into, and a vision that we can live into, too.

Friends, believe the good news, the vision is hopeful. God wants us to live into it with gusto. Amen.