



“The Gift of Optimism”

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Isaiah 55: 10–13***

Okay, you can go home now!

No, not you, but the ancient Israelites. That’s what Cyrus the Great, King of the Persian Empire, said to the Israelites after he conquered their captors, the Babylonians, in 538 BCE. You can go home now! Sorry about all that nasty business with the Babylonians; but I spoke with your God, and you can go home now and rebuild your Temple, your city, and everything that was destroyed.

Now, you’d think this would be a cause for great joy and some immediate packing of bags and gathering of children. Load up the carts and head out. After all, the Israelites had been forcefully removed from their land and held in captivity in Babylon for nearly three generations, pining away for Jerusalem and mourning the loss of their Temple, home of their invisible God, Yahweh.

Today’s scripture, however, provides a clue that the ancient Israelites were perhaps a little more than reluctant to leave Babylon for their burned-out homeland. From Chapter 40 to 56 of the Book of Isaiah, including today’s passage, a nameless prophet, referred to as Second Isaiah by Biblical scholars, calls the people over and over to return to the homeland of their parents and grandparents. He uses a multi-pronged approach, speaking dismissively of Babylon and its gods and hopefully of Judah and the God of Israel, Yahweh. He tells the people that all the former prophecies of their punishment by God through exile are now fulfilled, done, kaput, and that they have performed their penance not once but three times over. He pokes fun at the Babylonian idols, reminding the people that theirs is not a God carved from wood to be packed and toted around. Their God is invisible but forgiving and steadfast, and is to be worshipped in Jerusalem as the one and only one legitimate God, their creator and king. The people, Second Isaiah reminds them, are God’s suffering servants, whose suffering has been purposeful and redeeming, freeing the people to now re-embrace their mantle as God’s chosen. Second Isaiah cajoles and consoles and comforts the reluctant people with poems like today’s scripture reading, hoping to inspire optimism in the idea of leaving Babylon for the remains of Jerusalem and Judah.

That the people were reluctant to leave Babylon isn't hard to understand. Babylon was a flourishing civilization with art and architecture, and the Israelites had been there for several generations, intermarrying with the Babylonians and becoming acculturated to their ways. They may have felt they belonged in Babylon or they may just have feared what they would find when they returned to Judah.

I think all of us with backgrounds involving migration or exile or slavery can relate to some aspect of their mixed feelings of being released from long-term captivity and told to return to a place they've never known. Personally, I relate to their reluctance from the perspective of a second generation exile from the land of Oklahoma. In 1934, my father and his family were forced from their Oklahoma farm by drought, wind, dust, and the destruction of their top soil. Like 2.5 million other people negatively affected by the Dust Bowl, they left the Plains for the West Coast, arriving in Oregon after working as migrant laborers along the way. If a preacher or prophet suggested to me, as my father's child, that it was time to return to Oklahoma and rebuild the Baptist Church where my grandparents worshipped God, I'd be more than a tad reluctant. Indeed, I would think it impossible, improbable, and ill-advised. After just one generation of absence, I feel no personal connection to Oklahoma or anything there. Returning would be inconceivable.

And beyond what was probably both a lack of attachment and a terrible fear of the unknown, surely the Israelites were a little skeptical of what this prophet had to say. Other prophets—Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Jeremiah, and Obadiah—had harangued them for decades, casting and recasting the destruction of the Temple and the Exile to Babylon as punishment by God for their idol worship, social injustice, and ill-advised foreign treaties. It would have been hard to accept a prophet pulling a 180 on them, proclaiming a God ready to forgive and restore. And beyond the prophet, who was this Yahweh who had destroyed their homeland and Temple and thrust them into servitude? After all that had happened, could this punishing God be trusted to restore them in the barrenness of Judah? What could they expect from God?

In today's verses, Second Isaiah pulls out all the poetic stops to encourage the people's return. He says if the people will listen and understand that God's ways are not their ways, then God promises:

For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Mountains and hills bursting into song, trees clapping their hands, and everlasting evergreens for a people who shall go out in joy and be led in peace. Second Isaiah gives Israel a joyful and beautiful image to hold in their minds as they weigh their decision to stay or go. Instead of

a barren and harsh land, scorched by destruction, he offers mountains and hills. Instead of thorns and briars, he offers cypress and myrtle, two evergreen trees prized in the Ancient Near East for their many uses as shade, wood, and healing agents. By offering beauty over barrenness, joy over sorrow, Second Isaiah tells the people to have hope, to be optimistic because God's word is true and fruitful, as water is to the earth. It can be trusted by them and by all creation, which will join them in the joy of their return.

Second Isaiah's words are a gift of optimism to the Israelites, the kind of optimism it takes to begin a long journey from a known place to an unknown place. It offers a vision of the future that is not only kinder and gentler than the Israelites' worst fears, but is also mobilizing because it seeks to assure that the path forward is blessed by God and will bring joy and happiness.

I have noticed that we moderns are almost evenly divided about this kind of optimism and positive thinking as we are about politics and religion. On one hand, there are the positive-thinking, blessing-counting, if-you-dream-it, you-can-achieve-it, glass-over-flowing types, and on the other hand, there are an awful lot of let's-get-real, glass-half-empty, pragmatic-bordering-on-pessimistic types. If you Google optimism, you'll find as many smiley faces and articles about positive thinking as you will cynical posters of people trying to visualize themselves out of tight spots and cartoons equating optimism to overdosing on hard candy.¹

Like some sort of emotional divide, we seem to line up in one camp or the other. And unfortunately, the division isn't geographic and can't be charted in red and blue on a map of the U.S. Often the divisions about optimism are close encounters of the personal kind: within our families, between spouses, or between parents and children, or even within our own selves. My husband Scott and I have escaped the complete dichotomy of optimism and pessimism that plagues some couples. Without advance planning of any type, we like to take turns being pessimistic or, as he would call it, realistic. Not every couple is so lucky. There is an old saying that a pessimist is someone who spends too much time with an optimist.

But like many people, more often I encounter our cultural division over optimism within myself. My default mode seems to be something short of optimism and I must constantly remind myself that when it comes to changing what I don't like, being positive is more likely to succeed than negativity and hopelessness. So while I am not optimistic, I do "practice" optimism on a daily basis, trying to search and replace my more negative tendencies.

It is often said that optimism can be permanently learned, like riding a bike, and that once it is acquired, it is never forgotten. I don't know if I agree. As those of us who practice optimism know, there are things in this life that you can feel incredibly optimistic about at 9 am that by 9 pm will seem utterly, completely, demoralizingly impossible. Unless one is genetically predisposed to an optimistic frame of mind, thinking optimistically is something we must reset ourselves to do many times in each day.

¹ Hugh McCloud, gapingvoid.com, accessed July 7, 2011.

Today's scripture, however, reminds us that optimism is more than a spiritual practice. It is a spiritual gift we can give others. Second Isaiah is giving the Israelites a precious gift by reminding them that faith in God's word and faith in the future is a thing of beauty and a path to joy and peace. One of the best gifts of optimism I ever received was also a poem. Over a decade ago, in the midst of a self-initiated and anxiety-filled separation from my first husband, my friend Rae Jones hand-copied Mary Oliver's poem "Wild Geese" on a card and lovingly illustrated it with flying geese and a luminescent crescent moon. I was deeply touched because the gesture was caring and the words of the poem so poignant:

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.²

When she heard I was planning to preach on optimism, Loris Coburn told me another amazing gift of optimism. In 1992, during the siege of Sarajevo by Serbian forces, Vedran Smailovic, the principal cellist of the Sarajevo Opera, gave his war-ravished neighborhood and his city, and eventually all of us who hear and retell this story, a gift of both optimism and hope. After being an eyewitness to the killing by mortar shell of 22 people as they stood in line for bread, Vedran began the concert series of his life by stepping out each day for 22 days into the open devastation, into the plain view of Serbian gunmen who shot mortars shells and bullets around him, to set up a chair in the middle of the road, sit down, and play the cello for all who had the courage to hear. It was an act of bravery, but it was also a gift of optimism, a way to tell those who were witnessing the death of so many around them that there was still hope and dignity and a future waiting to be lived. All told, 10,000 people were killed and 150,000 people were injured during the four years the Sarajevo was under siege by the Serbians, but Vedran Smailovic lived to be honored by the celebrated cellist Yo Yo Ma and to leave Sarajevo and begin life again in Ireland. His gift inspired many other gifts of optimism. Take for example this lovely poem by Alan Cohen³ contrasting Vedran's life experience with the life experience of the composer Tomazo Albinoni, whose Adagio Vedran often played each day:

Tomazo wrote music for the pure simple joy of it,
but Vedran descending the Adagio's minor chords,
to find the steady pulse
A precise and stately dance on
the path leading out of Hell.
Dipping into the wells of practice.
The waters of beauty seeping into his, and our, being.
Every stroke a conscious vote to return.
Each note a step on the shattered path to life.

² Mary Oliver, "Wild Geese" in

³ Alan Cohen, "The Cellist of Sarajevo", powerofpoetry.org/cellist.htm, accessed July 7, 2011.

But one doesn't need to be a prophet, a poet, or a musician to give the gift of optimism. On September 12, 2001, my friend Linda Kilb, knowing that the Muslim family that owned the corner grocery near her house were probably scared out of their wits about how their neighbors would treat them in the aftermath of 9/11, bought a bouquet of flowers and hand delivered them to the family. When I asked her what she said, she gave a little shrug as if it was simple: "I told them I wanted them to know that they had friends and that I understood how hard it was right now." It was a simple thing, something any of us could do, but it was something she thought of because she is herself a powerful optimist and a giver of optimism extraordinaire.

There is no magic to giving optimism. I think that the cultural divide in our country over optimism is a sign that there are, however, some simple do's and don'ts when it comes to giving gifts of optimism.

Be authentic: It's probably best to avoid the perky, jaunty ways that fail to notice the mental state of the receiver. None of us like to be told "Be positive!" "Look on the bright side!" or some similar platitude like "Don't worry, be happy!" This is probably one of the main reasons optimism gets a bad rap: sometimes the optimist is blithely oblivious to the pain and suffering of those on the receiving end of their tutelage. While they may need help seeing the sun through their clouds, never let it escape your notice that sometimes they need someone to see the clouds too.

Keep it simple: Sometimes words work wonders and sometimes they can't hit the nail on the head at all. Consider the flower, the song, the folding of laundry, the deck of cards, and the simple act of sitting beside the bed or walking in the woods.

Be brave: Like Vedran and my friend Linda, sometimes the most optimistic gift in the world involves an act of personal courage, the taking of a stand, the willingness to give of one's self to world that is deeply divided over whether it makes sense to be optimistic or not.

And if you want to give yourself the gift of optimism, remember that Jesus, too, was a student of Isaiah and a giver of optimism. Recall how he sat on a hill and told those who gathered around: Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, or what you will wear. Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet God feeds them. Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, and yet even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. And if God so clothes the grass of the field, will God not much more clothe you?

My friends, God's word is like the rain and the snow that waters the earth. It gives seed to the sower and bread to the eater. It accomplishes its purpose. It was a gift of optimism for the people of Israel who decided to follow the prophet back to Judah to rebuild the Temple. It was a gift of optimism to the disciples and the early Christians who decided to follow Jesus. It is a gift of optimism for all who hear and share. Let us go out and give God's everlasting optimism to others. Amen.