

The rock from which you came

Isaiah 51:1-6

December 3, 2006

So, what do you think? Does this planet have a future? Are you hopeful about the next five years, the next fifty years, the next five hundred years? There are things we can do to make a difference, things that are possible, things that are within humanity's grasp.

We can boost test scores for our own children, and expand literacy efforts around the globe.

We can invest time and resources in developing new medicines, instead of new weapons.

We can reduce hunger.

We can reduce greenhouse gases.

We can get Palestinians and Israelis, Sunnis and Shiites, Pakistanis and Indians, Chechens and Russians, Muslims and Christians, to start talking with each other, instead of shooting at each other.

We can narrow the gap between rich and poor.

But there are some things we cannot do, some things that are impossible, some things that are beyond our ability to change.

You can't make something out of nothing.

You can't turn age-old enemies into friends.

You can't bring love out of a hateful heart.

You can't give life to something that is already dead.

You can't make a sinner into a saint.

You can't make a garden in the desert.

You can't birth a baby out of a barren womb.

But God can! God does all of these things! God does the impossible! So, what do you think? Does this planet have a future? Do you have a future?

Now I have to tell you that the burden of much of my ministry has been to make faith accessible to people, to help them see faith as something real, tangible, reasonable, attainable. I get very frustrated with ways of thinking about faith and practicing faith that keep God at a distance and keep faith from making any real difference in the way we go about the business of our lives.

When we read the Bible in a language none of us have spoken for four hundred years, we make it into a monument, a relic frozen in time, instead of the living word of God addressing us here and now.

When we retell the stories of the Bible in fairytale fashion -- little boy David winding up his slingshot, old man Moses lifting his arms and parting the waters -- the stories remain just that, fairy tales, instead of the powerfully human and palpably real stories they are.

Too often faith is no more than superstition, saying the right words, performing the right rituals, doing what we can to get on God's good side so that things will go well for us. But faith is not about magic or superstition, not about preserving ancient traditions or glorifying ancient heroes, not about building up good karma. Faith is about changed minds and changed direction, about new ways of thinking and new ways of living. It's about a God who engages us here and now, turning our lives upside down and inside out.

It's a faith that always needs fresh language, fresh ways of talking about the things the spirit of God is doing among us now.

It's a faith that retells the stories of the Bible as the human stories they are: young David, strong and brash, ready to face the enemy no one else would because of his trust in a God who saves; hesitant but passionate Moses, seeing the plight of his people through God's eyes, answering God's call to lead them out of Egypt to a new home none of them had ever seen, trusting God to make it happen.

It's a faith that doesn't just get us ready for the next life, but shows us how to make a difference in this life -- by our actions and our attitudes, by the choices we make every day to build up or to tear down.

And yet, the fact is that as reasonable and as practical as we might want our faith to be, as reasonable and practical as it surely is, it is at heart faith in a God who does the impossible, faith in a God who does for us what we cannot do for ourselves, and this is the basis of our hope. Hope has nothing to do being optimistic, believing that people can someday learn to listen to each other, believing that people can someday wise up and grow up, believing that people can someday lay aside their selfish pursuits and work together for a common good. Hope is rooted in faith, in believing that God can and will do for us what is impossible for us to do.

*The Lord says,
Listen to me, you that want to be saved,
you that come to me for help.
Think of the rock from which you came,
the quarry from which you were cut!*

The prophet speaks to Jews in exile, people convinced that their situation is hopeless, people convinced that God has completely forgotten them, urging them to remember those who have gone before them. Think of Abraham and Sarah! They could not have children, bringing a natural descendant into this world was entirely out of the question for them, but God gave them a child. God gave them Isaac!

Your city may be in ruins, your fields may be a wasteland, your days may be filled with despair and with grief, it may be impossible for you to imagine an end to the oppressive Babylonian empire, but think of the rock from which you came! Remember Abraham and Sarah. Remember the God who does the impossible, and believe that God will save you, too!

Think of the rock from which you came!

Think of Mitzi Makinster: ninety-five years old, living with constant pain, widowed for almost fifty years, diagnosed with an aortic aneurysm capable of rupturing at any moment and killing her in an instant. But you did not find in her what you might expect to find: fear or self-pity or bitterness or despair. No, you found courage and gratitude and joy, unflappable hope and radiant faith ... because she and God were tight, because she was hungry and thirsty for the presence of the living God and because God gave her what she wanted, because God did the impossible for her, giving her the gift of genuine hope even as her life ebbed away.

Think of Dawn Price: beset with physical ailments, having to have one leg amputated and then the other, enduring long hours of physical therapy learning to walk with a prosthesis, living alone seven hundred miles from daughter and granddaughter, then moving close to them only to grow more and more ill. But you did not find in her what you might expect to find: self-pity or bitterness or gloom. No, you found courage and a sweet spirit, a sense of humor and amazing strength. God did the impossible for her. God did not permit the potent forces that attacked her body and her spirit to subdue her or rob her of her joy.

Think of Jack Burg: surgery for a brain cancer, a body slowly wasting away, having to move out of his home to a nursing home, a man fond of dancing confined to a bed, almost immobile. But you did not find in him what you might expect to find: resignation, emptiness, despair. No, you found hope and desire, an undimmed smile and unabated affection. God did the impossible for him. God let him keep on dancing, long after his legs could no more hold him up.

Whatever obstacles you may face -- disease or demons, grief or fear, old age or self-doubt, loneliness or lack of direction -- think of the rock from which you came. Think of your spiritual siblings, Mizti and Dawn and Jack, and the wonders God did for them and through them.

But they're dead. Their hope in God was finally proved false.

Was it? What was their hope? That they would live forever? That they would be spared pain and death?

*Look up at the heavens; look at the earth!
The heavens will disappear like smoke;
the earth will wear out like old clothing,
and all its people will die like flies.
But the deliverance [the Lord] brings will last forever;
[God's] victory will be final.*

Hope is different from optimism. It's not that we think the earth will last forever or that we will last forever or that we will be spared the suffering and loss that are common to all human experience. Hope means that we live in expectation of God's ultimate victory, that we live toward that day, not resigned to death but eager for life, already celebrating the first tastes of a goodness that will last forever. In the midst of whatever pain we bear, we see beyond it and we see through it to the glory that is already present even now!

There is mystery here, the mystery of a God who does the impossible, and the mystery of a God who gives us eyes to see what otherwise cannot be seen. It is a mystery, but the results this faith borne of mystery effects in us are not mysterious at all, but real and tangible and powerful.

So, what do you think? Do you have a future? Think of the rock from which you came. Remember their witness. Remember their words. Remember Mizti's words:

*Don't give up hope ... sometimes it seems like you're just drawing a blank ...
but you'll find out that memories will nourish your hope ... and sometimes
just in the quiet of the night, in sneaks hope.*