

I wonder if you will indulge me just for a minute or so to do a little historical work. Many historians and observers of culture claim that you and I are living in what they refer to as a post-modern time. They referred to what came before this time as modernity. Modernity is not just modern life. It was a certain time in history that began with the industrial revolution and probably lasted until the latter part of the last century. Modernity brought with it a certain way of thinking and acting, a way that focused on the future and on progress. At the height of modernity, you might have heard something like, “Everything is getting better every day and in every way.” Post-modernity wonders about that.

You and I today are living in light of that wondering. We’re living in light of the disillusionment that has happened to many people because everything didn’t get better. Modernity wasn’t all that it was cracked up to be. Progress didn’t deliver as we were led to believe. Progress has been a mixed reality.

We developed great technologies that enabled us to go anywhere we wanted to go and consume almost anything we wanted to consume. But we didn’t think about the destructive impact that they would have on the earth. We developed technologies that enabled us to communicate across the globe in a split second. But we weren’t ready for the challenging consequences of those technologies for our political life, for our family life. More than ever, we have become divided, in part because of those technologies. And some of us have become crippled in our ability to socially interact with others. Progress, while appreciated, hasn’t been without its challenges. The focus on the future and the supposed brightness that the future will bring has not always been helpful.

The issue in our first reading for today is definitely the future, what will enable a bunch of exiles to move forward into the future with

confidence. These exiles are people who have come to Jerusalem or are being encouraged to move back home. But things aren't good at home. Disappointment reigns. Through the prophet God speaks: "Listen to me, you who seek the Lord: Look to the rock from which you were hewn and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many."

In other words, as you are trying to figure out how you can make it into the future, don't put all your money into the future basket. Look to the past. Look to that foundational story of Abraham and Sarah who really were quite insignificant, who didn't have any land, who were childless, but ended up with land and descendants as many as the stars in the sky. Look to something bigger than the latest and greatest. The latest technological gadget, while downright interesting, isn't long lasting. It will give you what you want for a little while, but soon you will need something newer, which after you get that you will want something yet newer. The newer, like what Isaiah says will happen to the earth and the heaven, will vanish like smoke, wear out like a garment, die like gnats. It won't last. Progress sometimes can disappoint.

As you move into the future, look to the past. Now I don't say that with the intent of encouraging you to live in the past, which is what some people do. Living in the past is not the full life. Getting stuck in the way we used to do things, the way the family, the church, and the culture used to be isn't what I am recommending.

God's invitation to the Israelites to look to the past wasn't intended to keep them tied to the past. It was meant to compel them to move boldly into the future. It was to remind them of their foundation, who they were and are as God's people. Let's face it. We all need foundations. We need something upon which we can build our lives.

Kids need something foundational. Honestly, I am always bothered when parents say to me in terms of their kids' religious life, "I don't want to impose anything on my kids. I want them to decide for themselves." How can they decide for themselves when they have nothing against which they can measure their decision? They need more than hockey, soccer, music, or good grades. They need big-picture, identity-giving foundations.

My wife and I celebrated an anniversary this past week. We've been married a long time, 42 years. When we were having dinner out on Tuesday, I asked my wife the question that people are often asked when they have lived a long time or been married a long time: what do you think the secret is to the longevity? Her response was "the ability to forgive."

Building on that, I said that in our case our ability to do that is rooted in our sharing the same big story. We're on the same page together. We have a common foundation. Truthfully, Bev and I are really different from each other. And we have discovered that truth more and more the longer we are together. But we have something that came out of our past, something that was given to us by our parents and by many others who have gone before us, something that has thousand-year roots. As we go forward, we look to the rock from which we were hewn. Now I am not suggesting that this is some kind of guarantee. Life happens. People disappoint. Relationships go sour, even with common foundations.

But what I am suggesting is that we are served by foundations that often are not of our own creating. We need something bigger, a bigger story, a narrative that stands the test of time. Building your life on the latest and the greatest, building your life simply on your choices, your preferences, your opinions is quite flimsy. You need something more. Kids need something more. The church needs something more,

something lasting. I think that's why in part Matthew tells the story of Peter, *the rock*, and his confession of faith.

You will note that for Israel that something more, as God through the prophet Isaiah reveals, is a foundation of promise. The story of Abraham and Sarah, if it is anything, is a story of promise. Sarah can't conceive. The future for them feels empty. But God says that he has a big future for them. The promise is that they will be blessed with children and land. From one couple will come many, a great nation. God is a promise-making God.

The foundation for us, call it *baptism*, is a foundation of promise. The past to which we look is filled, replete, saturated with promise. That's important to underscore because some of us look to the past and only see abuse, neglect, abandonment. And of course, those realities are part of your story. You cannot run from them, and they do not need to be hidden. But those realities are not your foundational story. You are a baptized child of God. You are immersed with the promises of God. You have been drowned with Christ and have been raised with him. Your story is a story rooted in promise. And the promise hasn't finished its work on you or us together.

Listen to what God tells the exiles of Israel, people who are trying their darnedest to make a way into the future: "The Lord will comfort Zion, [the devastated city of Jerusalem]. He will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord."

Waters will flow. The God of promise continues the work of promise. And note again how that work focuses on something out of the past—Eden, the garden of the beginning. The prophet is taking exiles who know what it means to be landless, back to the beginning, reminding them that the God of promise is about the business of restoring the land and returning hope. They are taken back to Eden and

assured that their future will be a matter of delight, joy and gladness, full of the “voice of song,” that is to say, marvelous music. Often when we think of Eden, we think only of luscious vegetation and full streams. Isaiah’s vision of Eden includes the lusciousness of beautiful music. Your future will *sound* wonderful.

And part of what will make it sound so wonderful is the teaching that will still come forth to the nation. Once again, Isaiah is taking us to the past when God through him says: “Listen to me, my people, and give heed to me, my nation; for a teaching will go out from me.” A teaching. The Torah. As Isaiah is helping exiles make a way into the future, he is pointing them back to the great teaching of Israel. The great teaching, some people call it the Law, is a gift from the past, but its power is not limited to the past. It gives direction for the future.

You and I need direction. Our kids need direction. They and we need the teaching. We don’t do well without teaching. To think we can thrive in the future on the basis of what we teach ourselves, what our desires want for us, or what the neighbors want for us is to go down a dangerous path. We need guidance. We need limits. We need *the teaching*, which by the way is why we offer Bible study, why we provide faith formation classes for kids and adults, why we encourage kids to go through the process of confirmation. We live in light of something bigger, something deeply rooted. That something needs to be remembered. That story needs to be told. That teaching needs to be taught. And as it is remembered, told, and taught, community is formed. Out of one comes many.

You have what you need to move forward into the future with courage and confidence. Oh, it’s not easy, I know. The ruins are many. The disappointments are all around us. But you have a foundation. You are children of promise. Your roots go back all the way to creation itself,

to the abundant Garden of Eden. And yes, you have direction for your life. You are a part of the *we*. *We* go into the future together.