

Isaiah 25:6-9 Easter 4.4.21 Pastor Bill Uetricht

I have often thought that poetry has never been given its due! Abraham Lincoln in his second inaugural address spoke poetically: “With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.” Oh my! Poetry. Poetry that shaped the direction of our nation.

Martin Luther King on the mall in Washington spoke these words of poetry: “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.’ I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today.” Poetry! Poetry that changed the direction of our land.

Poetry and soaring rhetoric can create a whole new world. Yes, you are right. Sometimes poetry isn’t always realistic. “With malice toward none and charity for all.” Really? I don’t think I am there yet. And yes, sometimes the poetry isn’t always that accurate. “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal.” These words from the Declaration of Independence obviously didn’t include women and slaves.

The Bible has lots of poetry: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” “Although I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” And then today: “On this mountain, the mount of Zion, the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will

destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will destroy death forever.”

This is poetic imagination. This is soaring rhetoric. Obviously, this is not rooted in some kind of empirical reality. The scholars call this portion of Isaiah “Isaiah’s apocalypse,” his vision of the future, the future beyond all futures. The vision is very Jewish. The end is a giant party—a party beyond all parties. The best food. Lamb, salmon, kebabs, schwarma, curried chicken, Brussel sprouts, feta cheese, hummus, naan bread, rice and bread pudding, baklava, and apple fritters. And also the best drink and wine: Mogen David, David Harrell’s homemade wine, Moscato, Sangria. No Merlot or Chardonnay, of course.

It’s assumed, by the way, that this party is a shared experience. This isn’t a private party for the privileged. God on Mt. Zion is said to be throwing a party for *all* nations, *all* peoples. In three verses today, the word “all” is used five times. This is a massive poetic vision, even if Isaiah himself doesn’t always get it. Just before this vision he speaks of the impending *judgment* of the nations. And after his vision, he blasts the Moabites, who for some reason are the people he is not yet ready to include. The poets themselves don’t always get the fullness of their own imagination.

Even if he does not fully grasp it, Isaiah’s vision for today is huge. A massive party for everyone. But there is one thing that is missing at this party: the shroud that is cast over everyone, the sheet that is spread over all the nations. Death is gone. It has been swallowed up forever. The shame that is laid on all of us because of death is gone. The tears and the mourning that accompany death are forever done away with.

Oh, this is massive imaginative poetry. This is soaring rhetoric. But you are right. It is not overly realistic, at least in the way we

imagination-stunted people in the 21st century perceive realism. But Easter is about a new imagination. Easter is about the poetry of hope.

Several years ago my son Micah gave me this--I suppose we could call it--piece of art. (A framed picture of three lines of music was shared.) The words of the music read: "Confidence to sing that death has lost its venomed sting." I like the fact that that line is repeated three times in the picture. Even though the song speaks of confidence, I suspect that the confidence it sings of is feebler than the sureness that some of us associate with confidence. Maybe I have to sing it three times, or more likely a hundred times, before I trust it. The hard data of death is difficult to dispute.

I feel that more than ever this year. The pandemic has been brutal in so many ways. It's meant that we haven't had parties together, big celebrations with the finest food and drink. There haven't been big church celebrations. There haven't been big concerts and plays. And for the most part, there haven't been small parties and neighborhood gatherings. But there has been loads of sickness, and in our case here, a superabundance of death. The data of death has been difficult to dodge, unless you specialize in avoidance, which has been the case for far too many people this past year. Oh yes, things are better and there does seem to be a light at the end of the tunnel. But this Covid stuff is stubborn; it doesn't want to let go. The data of death just keeps lingering over our heads.

From my vantage point, it's for people like us that Mark has written his Easter story. It is more subtle, less bombastic, less over the top than Isaiah's soaring rhetoric, his massive imaginative poetry. Mark's story seems to meet us just where we are, especially this year, but note this, it isn't content to leave us where we are. Like Isaiah, it wants to give us a new imagination.

Some grieving women show up at the tomb, with death on their mind. What else could they be thinking about? Desiring to anoint Jesus' body, these women are wondering who is going to roll away the stone that would be covering the grave. When they get there, the stone has already been rolled away. Their imagination is beginning to be stretched. Entering the grave, they see a young man, who reassures them. "You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was killed," the young man says. "He has been raised. He is not here. Go tell Peter and his friends that he has gone ahead of them not to Jerusalem, the rich center of everything, but Galilee, where the motely, peasant-oriented Jesus movement had its genesis.

So, the women flee the tomb. The imaginative promise is leading them forward. But note what Mark says, how he ends his whole story: "They fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." Actually, in the Greek, the sentence reads "they were afraid for..." as if there were more story to come. We don't get any appearance of Jesus stories in Mark. We aren't led to think, "And they will live happily ever after." Fear and terror are still present. The data of death still haunts. But in the midst of death, the poetry of life has subtly appeared. In the midst of death has come that which starts to give us the confidence to sing that death has lost its venomous sting!

I really appreciate Mark's conservative entrance into the resurrection. Honestly, it's so realistic. Life is hard. And he in no way denies that. As he hesitantly proclaims the resurrection, he focuses our attention back on the cross. That is so helpful to me, especially now as true resurrected life seems closer, but not fully here, as the pandemic just won't let go. I feel like I am being led to leave the tomb and head toward Galilee without a degree of certainty. Only a promise leads me. A promise that won't let me deny the tough stuff. In fact, this promise

lets me know God is especially there in the tough stuff as Jesus cries out at the end, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”

But again, this conservative approach is not the only view of resurrection we get today. While we embrace Mark, we also embrace the soaring rhetoric of Isaiah. So, while I don't want to be too bold, while like a good Midwesterner I don't want to get too carried away, I, nonetheless, want to not only trust Mark's subtly, but I want to lean into the world-changing imaginative poetry of Isaiah. I know it's early, but I am starting to think about planning some big parties. I am anticipating eating the best food and drink shared with loads of people. I am beginning to hear voices come together in song in church communities and even choirs. I am dreaming of life where the wet blanket of death is not controlling me and you.

I know this day is not tomorrow. I am no starry-eyed optimist. But in the midst of the data of death has appeared life, the kind of life that death cannot extinguish. I am going to lean into that which brings life. I am going to lean into joy. I am going to lean into forgiveness that will not allow the past to speak the final word. I am going to lean into including and welcoming, especially those who don't normally get a seat at the big parties. I am going to lean into tending to the earth that has been visited by too much death. I am going to lean into finding the confidence to sing that death has lost its venomous sting.