

The long and short of it

Isaiah 51:1-6

August 21, 2005

You really only have two choices. Whatever your circumstances, whatever your history, whatever your prospects, you have two choices -- hope or despair.

Either you live with expectation or with resignation, with a sense of possibility or a sense of defeat, with hope or with despair.

Either you believe that tomorrow can be better than today and you eagerly await the new day, or you dread tomorrow because you are convinced it will be nothing more than a repeat of today, at best.

Either you give up ... on yourself, your children, your marriage, your friends, your job ... on getting married or having friends or finding a good job ... on your future, on this world's future, on life, on God. Or you continue to believe ... to believe in God's power to make things new ... to believe that illnesses can be healed, that broken relationships can be reconciled, that sins can be forgiven, that bitterness and envy and hatred can be overcome and that there can be peace.

You really only have two choices -- hope or despair. Which will you choose?

If you choose despair, I have little more to say to you, except to urge you to reconsider! *Think of the rock from which you came!* Think of Abraham and Sarah, who left behind the only home they knew to settle in the land of God's promise. Think of Moses and Miriam, who defied the Egyptian tyrant to bring God's people out of slavery and into freedom. Think of Peter -- called "The Rock" -- the rock upon which the church, this church, is built.

This is *the quarry from which you were cut!* You come from people like these. These are your ancestors. These are your brothers and sisters in faith. Remember them! And remember they are people like you! Abraham and Sarah were childless into their old age. Moses lacked courage. Peter was sincere and passionate, but failed the ultimate test of his loyalty. God helped them. God strengthened them. God saved them. And God will help and strengthen and save you!

Think of Jesus! Jesus is the rock from which you came, the stone which the builders rejected but chosen by God to become the cornerstone of God's church. Jesus is one of us, tempted in every way as we are, but without sin. Tempted in every way as we are, but without sin! Now that is hopeful! If Jesus could do it, and Jesus is ready to help ...

Jesus is like you, knowing suffering and rejection and humiliation and loss and death. But God raised him. God raised him to new life ... and God will raise you, too!

You are not alone. Whatever your particular trials and tribulations may be, they are not unique. Someone else has known them too. Despair is a profoundly selfish choice -- thinking the world is against you, thinking it all depends on you, thinking it's all about you.

It's not! It's not about you. It doesn't depend on you. Take a chill pill, let go of your pride, and choose hope!

If you do choose hope, choose all of it ... the long and short of it.

We read today from the book of Isaiah. The prophet addresses Hebrew people living in Jerusalem during the time of the Babylonian exile. Most of the residents of that city had been forcibly repatriated, living as exiles in a foreign land, but some were left behind, living still in their hometown. They are "home," but it is a home left ravaged and desolate by the invading army, a land left empty of people, empty of laughter, empty of promise, empty of hope.

Which would be worse ... to be far away in a strange land among strange people, dreaming of home? Or to be home and to be reminded every waking moment it is not home anymore?

The prophet reminds them that though their land may be empty of people and crops and city walls and a Temple, it is not empty of God! *Remember the rock from which you came, the quarry from which you were cut!* God gave children to a barren couple and God will make a garden to rival Eden in this barren land! God will remember you. God will show you compassion. God will bring you joy and gladness.

But that's only half the story, the short of it. God will save you, but God will save the nations, too, distant nations that also wait with hope for God to save them. God cares about Jerusalem, and God cares too about Edom and Egypt and Syria ... and Babylon. God cares about Israel ... and about Palestine, about the United States and Afghanistan, about India and China and Russia and Sudan.

And that's still only the short of it! Choose hope, hope for yourself, hope for your neighbors, hope for peoples near and far, hope for this earth as long as it endures, but don't stop there! When the heavens disappear like smoke, when the earth finally wears out like old clothing, when its people die like flies, the deliverance the Lord brings will have only begun! The deliverance the Lord brings lasts forever!

That's the long and the short of it. It is startling how easily the prophet shifts focus from Jerusalem's plight to the plight of distant nations, from hope in the near term to hope after the end of time. It is all one seamless fabric of hope! Because all lands and all people, all times and all places, the past, the present, the future, and whatever lies beyond the future ... all rest in God's hands.

It is a shame and it blunts the effectiveness of the church's witness to the Good News, when we hope, but undo hope's seamless fabric by putting all our hope either in this world or in the next. We carry the banner of peace and justice, but speak nothing of the new heaven and the new earth God will bring into being. We are too shy or too uncertain to make any claims about what may come after this heaven and this earth pass away. Or we encourage folks to take heart by the promise of eternal life and God's final victory at the end of history, but offer no challenge, no real expectation, that God can make a difference now, that God can heal, reconcile, forgive, restore, bring peace, in us and through us, here and now.

It is a shame and it blunts the effectiveness of the church's witness to the Good News, when we hope, but undo hope's seamless fabric by expecting God to help us, but not them ... whoever us or them may be!

So choose hope, and when you do, choose all of it ... the long and short of it! Choose hope for us and hope for them. Believe that God will provide ...

*Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
Blessings all ours and ten thousand beside!
Great is your faithfulness!
Great is your faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see.
All I have needed your hand has provided;
Great is your faithfulness, Lord, unto me!*