**Hold Firm to the Vision**

**Text: Isaiah 2:3-4**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

**December 1, 2019**

A long drive through bitter weather is something of a holiday tradition in my family. There was the year in my childhood when we drove our old ‘53 Plymouth through a blizzard to get to Grandma and Grandpa’s house; the storm’s fury increasing exponentially with each retelling of the story.

I don’t remember much of that trip, but I have no doubt that two things occurred as we plowed through the snow: my mother was sure that we were all going to die, and my dad, steady at the wheel, was singing. I don’t know if Dad was always as calm on the inside as he seemed to be, but on the outside at least, very little upset him. He was so calm in a crisis that my sister called him “Fearless Floyd.” So I imagine my dad leading us through the family repertoire of folk songs and Christmas carols and “Over the river and through the woods to Grandmother’s house we go,” because that was, of course, where we were going.

Someone has to remain calm in a crisis. Someone has to have a vision of how good it’s going to be when the storm passes and everyone is safe. That’s a function of leadership, whether we’re talking about a family, a church or a nation.

Isaiah offered that vision to the people of Jerusalem. The prophet proclaimed hope when the people around him could see only despair. As best as biblical scholars can reconstruct the scene, the context is 701 B.C. Jerusalem is besieged by the Assyrian Army. It’s only a matter of time before the city will fall. Then there’s no telling what kind of atrocities might be visited upon God’s people.

How can this be? God will protect Jerusalem forever. That’s what the people had been taught. That’s what King Hezekiah, Isaiah’s boss, thought. Now the king is panicking and the people are confused and they don’t know what to think. But Isaiah is a voice of reassurance. Of course, he knows that Jerusalem has a lot to answer for. Her sins are such that God had every reason to lower the boom. Injustice is rampant in the land. The people are placing far more trust in the weapons of war than in the wisdom of God. But Isaiah places his trust in God. Isaiah knows that the Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. “Jerusalem will be spared,” Isaiah says; “not because she has done anything to deserve mercy, but because it is God’s very nature to be merciful.” In fact, the prophet said, Jerusalem would be more than spared from this present crisis. Her future would be glorious.

You see, the prophet had a vision. Caught-up, perhaps, in a prophetic trance, he had seen a vision of the future breaking into the present; a vision of Jerusalem transformed. Mt. Zion – the modest hill upon which sat Jerusalem’s Temple – modest Mt. Zion had become in his vision the tallest mountain in the world. Higher than the storied mountains to the north and east, higher than any mountain in the vast Assyrian Empire, the mountain of the Lord’s house was raised above all the hills, and all the nations came to it. They came not with fists clenched around the weapons of war, but with minds open for learning, and hearts yearning to be fed. And then those words that have brought hope to Jews and Christians and the people of many nations for several millennia:

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Isaiah 2:3-4).

In the midst of a crisis, someone has to stay calm. When despair is setting in, someone has to offer a vision. Because, you see, without a vision, the people will perish. Of all the wise words in the Bible, these words from Proverbs 29:18 are among the wisest: “Where there is no vision, the people perish.”

Now visions can look either backward or forward. There are visions of restoring a lost past that perhaps never was, and visions of a glorious future that some day may be. The backward glance is a form of nostalgia that is not always helpful. The forward vision is what the Bible offers as hope. When times are tough – as in many ways they are today – nostalgia is heartbreaking in its poignancy. The pain of the present casts our minds back to the past, and our hearts ache with loss. Oh, how we want to be transported back to those happier days! But that will never happen; and we know that, of course. So, really, we have only two choices: we can wallow in our pain and despair, or we can look to the future with hope. The Bible bids us to look to the future. Time and again the Bible offers us a vision of God breaking into the present from the future. Indeed, that’s the vision that Advent is all about. The passages of hope that speak of the coming of Messiah – those scriptures that warm our hearts and refresh our hopes as we read them year after year in the run-up to Christmas – they offer the vision of a day and a world when war and oppression and despair will be no more.

Today’s passage from Isaiah is one of the most powerful. It even inspired the sculpture that sits in front of the United Nations: a bronze statue depicts a strong man swinging a mighty mallet, as he beats a deadly sword into a plough; a weapon of war becomes an implement of peace that will cultivate a field, that the people of the world might be fed.

“They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks:” a powerful vision indeed. “Completely crazy,” some might say. “Utterly unrealistic,” others might add. And in terms of the immediate realities of the world, this is true. But a vision isn’t intended to be realistic; not right away, anyway. A vision is a transcendent glimpse of the way things might be, someday. Isaiah’s vision of peace is *not* realistic, any more than the mole hill of Mt. Zion is taller than Mt. Everest. But without a transcendent vision to draw us out of the pain of the present and the plain of common sense, we’re dead in the water.

A transcendent vision is, first of all, good news! A great vision draws our eyes from the despair of the present to the possibilities of the future. Which is why we have Our Future Story. Our current situation is, of course, not tenable. But a vision gives us a dream to aim for. A vision of a transformed Camp gives us a mission beyond ourselves. A vision of a Sunday morning Children, Worship and Wonder program gives us a mission to our children. And a vision of community partnerships gives us a mission and an identity in Bedford. And a congregation with both mission and identity is a congregation that will grow. It’s a congregation to which people will be drawn, not unlike the way in which people are drawn to Jerusalem in Isaiah’s vision: with minds open to learning and hearts yearning to be fed. And a growing congregation moves us into the future. And that, of course, is good news.

We have to keep coming back to the vision, even if we seem to be going nowhere. *Especially* if we seem to be going nowhere; and history seems to be crashing down upon us. This is the lesson of the prophet Habakkuk, whose words we used for our Call to Worship. His era was some 125 years after Isaiah, when Jerusalem was once again under seize; this time at the hands of the Babylonians. And there seemed, once again, to be no hope. In my own moments of despair, when it has felt like life has lost all meaning and direction and purpose, I have returned to his vision of the in-breaking of God’s glorious future time and time again:

“For still the vision awaits its time; it hastens to the end, it will not lie. If it seem slow, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay” (Hab. 2:3).

The Lord is coming: in that ultimate sense of the Second Coming, when *all* will be made right, and in the penultimate sense of God’s future breaking-in even now and bringing new life into the midst of our world, our nation, our town and our congregation: The Lord is coming, the vision will be realized, and the Holy One has yet more light to break forth in our midst.

First of all, a transcendent vision is good news and, secondly, we are more likely to live into that vision if we conclude that failure is not an option. The in-breaking of the future and the fulfillment of the vision is ultimately God’s work, but we’re more likely to turn around and lean into the vision if we’re all clear about the fact that the current situation is not acceptable and we have to keep moving forward.

Failure is not an option. It’s like the adventure that my dad and I had one Saturday evening when I was maybe 8 years old. You’ve heard me speak of the Hyde Park Neighborhood Club in Chicago. That’s where my siblings and I went for after-school programs and our dad was involved in the Men’s Service Club. The Neighborhood Club sold Christmas trees each year as a fundraiser, and the Men’s Service Club ran the sale. Which meant that every Saturday during Advent Dad was at the Club selling trees and we were there – um – “helping;” at least in *our* minds we were helping. But sometimes we had to do some real work. If you paid a little extra, the men would deliver your Christmas tree to your house; or, as was often the case, your apartment. In just about every neighborhood in Chicago you’ll find the classic, 3 story, walk-up apartment building. Except that it’s really 4 stories because there’s often a basement apartment on the ground floor and you have to go up 1 flight of stairs to reach the 1st floor. And Dad and I had to deliver this one tree to the 3rd floor; which is really the 4th floor. That’s 8 steps up, a tight turn on a landing, then 8 more steps, and turn. Then repeat; twice. Not a big deal unless…you’re hauling an 8 foot Christmas tree; and your partner is this scrawny, 8-year-old kid. But failure was not an option. It never occurred to me that Dad and I couldn’t do it. Dad made *sure* that it didn’t occur to me! It took some doing, and a lot of patience and encouragement on Dad’s part, but we did it!

We are more likely to live into the future when failure is not an option. Isaiah made sure that King Hezekiah understood that. And as the prophet speaks God’s Word to us from across the ages, he makes sure that we understand that as well.

A transcendent vision is good news, and failure is not an option, because the future is on the way. We don’t know what the future holds, but God does. We’ve made our best and most faithful guess in Our Future Story, but what ultimately comes to pass is up to God. It would be rather arrogant to think otherwise. We don’t often think of despair as a form of arrogance, but in an ironic kind of way, it is. God promises hope while we see despair, and in our arrogant despair, we presume to know more about the future than God does. When you think about it, it’s kind of silly.

King Hezekiah thought he knew what the future would hold. He figured that either his army would win a great victory over the Assyrians, or the Assyrians would crush his forces and Jerusalem would be destroyed. It had to be one or the other, there was no doubt in his mind, and why did this silly prophet and advisor of his – this utterly unrealistic Isaiah – why did he keep insisting that God has something completely different in mind? But Isaiah’s voice of calm remained consistent amidst the crisis. And he kept pointing to the vision. And then, one morning, Hezekiah’s watchmen took to the ramparts, and they looked out at the land surrounding Jerusalem, and the Assyrians were gone.

When God’s future is breaking into our midst, there’s no telling what might happen. All we know for sure is that if it’s God’s future, then it’s very good. One dare not cast one’s sights so low that one fails to glimpse the cosmic drama in which we’re involved; a drama with a glorious ending: if we but wait for it patiently and seek it faithfully. Amen.