

Isaiah 25:6-9 Easter 4/01/18 Pastor Bill Uetricht

There are some days when the words—fancy people say “the rhetoric”—need to be large, over the top, even unrealistic. When our forefathers wanted to declare our nation’s independence from England, they wrote: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.” That’s big rhetoric, and truthfully, unrealistic rhetoric. All men are created equal? Obviously, most of our forefathers didn’t mean women when they said men. They certainly didn’t mean slaves, who were thought to be only three fifths of a person. But these words, we would say, were right and good. They represented a vision of what it meant to be who we are.

When Martin Luther King Junior at a pivotal time in our national history stood in the Mall of Washington in 1963, leading hundreds of thousands of people in calling to the end of racism, he spoke amazing, over-the-top, unrealistic rhetoric :

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 one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood. I have a dream that my four 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.

What a vision, albeit an unrealistic one! Even today that dream has not been fulfilled. Obviously, we have made progress, but too often we still don’t sit at the table of brotherhood; too often we judge others not by the content of their character.

Yet still, there are days when the rhetoric needs to be large, over the top; days when there is a call to trust something other than the so-called facts, the situation on the ground. There are days when the dream needs to be dreamed, the big vision needs to be cast. For the church, Easter is definitely one of those days. In fact, it is our big day to

think big, to dream massive dreams, to express over-the-top, unrealistic hope. On Easter we get words like these:

On this mountain—Mt. 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 [all kinds of fat]. And he will destroy on that mountain the burial cloth that is cast over *all* peoples, the sheet that is spread over *all* nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then God will wipe away the tears from *all* faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from *all* the earth.

This is over-the-top rhetoric. This is a massive vision. This isn't about hope for you personally or for your individual soul. This is hope for all the nations, for all people. This is the hope that takes on the most realistic aspect of human existence: death. In Canaanite religion, a religion that Israel's religion struggled against, the god of death swallows up Baal, one of the major gods. But here in Isaiah's vision, God swallows up death. God is bigger than death. God eliminates it and therefore does away with the hard, realistic realities that death brings: tears, mourning, and disgrace.

The first two of that list are obvious. Unmistakably, we cry and we mourn all the time, often because of death. We're well acquainted with those things. But the third—disgrace-- is a little less obvious, but no less real. Death in its literal form and in the forms we experience daily in life's hardness, our shame, and our sense of inadequacy tear us down all the time, affect every relationship we have. Every encounter we have is shaped by the baggage we bring to it. Here in the vision of Isaiah the baggage is gone, not simply for you, but for the nations. The goofy stuff we do as nations and as individuals because of our sense of disgrace is now, in this vision, gone.

That's a big deal. Can't you feel the burdens being lifted? We are not shaped by those who have victimized us, and even by our own victimization of ourselves. Can't you sense a new power in the universe? Can't you see North Korea, the United States, Russia, the Islamic State, Iraq, Afghanistan backing down, letting the air out? The

shame that determines so much is gone. The bravado that accompanies shame is eliminated.

Oh, but pastor, you are so unrealistic. Yes, yes, yes! That is the hope of Easter, the massive hope that belongs to this day, belongs to those who trust that the future that God holds for the nations and for the earth is a future of life, a future where tears, mourning, and disgrace all have been eliminated.

This is a massive day—a day that deserves rhetoric that is soaring, rhetoric that is over the top, rhetoric that is even unrealistic. Easter is about massive hope—hope for the whole world, for everything that is. But before you get lost in the massive character of this hope—the way that it includes all nations and all people—you must grasp that this hope also includes you. This hope is big enough for your and my little lives.

I am intrigued by the way the gospel writer John tells his resurrection-of-Jesus story. The focus in his Easter story is on three characters, apart from Jesus. Those characters are Peter, the Beloved disciple, and Mary Magdalene. Each of these characters has a different role to play in the narrative, and each of them responds differently to the reality of the empty tomb. The story tells us that Peter and the Beloved Disciple are typical males, competing with each other, racing to the tomb after Mary Magdalene tells them that the body of Jesus is not in the tomb. The Beloved Disciple wins the race, but Peter goes in first. (Truthfully, I sense some political struggles going on in John's community as this story is being told. Peter is given a nod for being important, but the Beloved Disciple, perhaps the patron saint of John's community, is getting some good press. He's being highlighted.)

Nonetheless, I am struck by how John describes Peter's and the Beloved Disciple's response to their experience. The Beloved Disciple, when he went in, "saw and believed." The same was not said of Peter. Who knows how Peter processed this experience? Did he believe? I don't know. Both of them, we are told, don't fully get what's going on: "As yet they did not understand the scripture that he must rise from

the dead.” One is said to believe, and the other we are not so sure about. But both of them aren’t fully with the program. They don’t really get it all.

And then we have Mary Magdalene who is weeping at the tomb. She’s worried that Jesus’ body has been stolen. She confronts Jesus outside of the tomb in the garden, and doesn’t recognize him. She thinks that he is the gardener, saying to him, “If you have carried his body away, let me know where it is. I want to tend to his body. I will move it.” Then Jesus says to her, “Mary.” He names her. You see, the shepherd knows the sheep by name. Mary doesn’t so much figure out Jesus, but Jesus has her figured out. Mary is known and then she recognizes him: “Rabbi, Jesus, it’s you.” Initially, she didn’t get it. How could she? Death is what she came to visit. Death is all she knew. Death is realistic. Resurrection is not. Only when she heard her name did she know that life was calling her, that something larger than death had come on the scene.

This massive day of hope is meant for John who believes, yet still, doesn’t fully get it. It’s meant for Peter, who—who knows—might believe or doesn’t, but clearly doesn’t fully get it. This day is meant for Mary who has come with nothing but death on her mind, lost in her grieving, blinded by her tears, but empowered, nonetheless, by one who knows her, names her, one who shepherds her. This day, we will find out next week, will be for one named Thomas who is full of doubt, who has to have things proven to him, who is bold enough to ask the questions don’t have the nerve to ask.

This day is big enough to include all the nations and the peoples, and big enough to include each of us—us who some days believe and get it and on other days don’t get it; us who can be blinded by our own grief, our own victimization, our own tears; us who simply don’t get it until our names are called, until we are reassured that we matter, that we are known; us who doubt, who question, who wonder; us who on some days have it together and on most days don’t; us whose behavior sometimes is stellar and sometimes is less than commendable; us who

feel on some days that we can live with great courage and yet on others are ready to throw in the towel.

The massive rhetoric of Easter is for the nations of the world and also for you and for me. Unrealistic as it may seem, death is not the final word. We would put it this way. Jesus is risen. Jesus has been raised, anticipating the great future when death will be swallowed up forever, when all tears will be wiped from all eyes, when shame, disgrace, and inadequacy will be no more. Lean into that future. Trust it. Live today with massive hope for everything and everybody—yes, even for yourself.