

“Something Old, Something New”
Isaiah 43:16-21

The South American Country of Columbia is not known to us for its successes. Its powerful drug cartels, environmental degradation, and the severe poverty and violence are some of the things that come to mind when thinking of Columbia. Yet, in this country, there is an amazing community called Gaviotas which is an eco-village of about 200 people. For three decades, Gaviotans - peasants, scientists, artists, and former street kids - have worked on building an oasis of imagination and sustainability in the remote, barren savannas of eastern Colombia, an area ravaged by political terror. They have planted millions of trees, regenerating an indigenous rainforest, farmed organically and used wind and solar power. Every family enjoys free housing, community meals, and schooling. The United Nations named the village a model of sustainable development. What is interesting about this community to me is their way of dealing with failure and hardships. What has kept the vision of this community alive is their ability to adapt and keep trying. Their success comes not as a result of brilliant planning, but from trial and error, with plenty of wrong turns along the way. Their motto has been AVV which stands for “*Allí vamos viendo...*” which means, “we’ll see what happens as we go along.”

Wow! To have that kind of attitude about life seems so counter-cultural for us. How could we just see what happens as we go along? Aren’t we supposed to have college plans, vacation plans, career plans, retirement plans, and even funeral plans? Aren’t we supposed to know where we are headed in life? Aren’t we supposed to have a vision for ourselves and our world?

Unfortunately, we often confuse vision for life with our plans for life. The result is that our plans become the goal of life instead of our vision for a fruitful and abundant life. We end up getting attached to our mental pictures of what life is supposed to be and forget to be open to things that we cannot begin to imagine. This is especially difficult when our plans don’t come to fruition, or when our plans simply fail: Our dream job becomes our biggest nightmare, our perfect marriage turns out to be a fraud, or when our search for happiness seems to only lead us into further depression. When our plans are frustrated, it is easy to find ourselves down in the dumps with no hope and no vision for a different future.

This is what happened to the people of Israel when they were exiled. Their national aspirations, their freedom, their independence, their way of life were all taken away from them when the Babylonians took over their country and sent them away to live in a foreign land. This experience was so demoralizing for the people. It was not like their experience in Egypt in terms of becoming slaves. In Babylon, their suffering was definitely not as bad, but their sense of captivity was just as real and oppressing. In his book, *The Land*, biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann describes the experience of the exiled Jews noting that, “The exiled Jews were not oppressed, abused, or imprisoned. But they were displaced, alienated from the place that gave identity and security...[and] the shapes and forms that gave power to faith and life.” For Israel, exile was being lost, homesick, divided, unmoored, rootless except for memory. Ancient empires knew how to eradicate a people. They didn’t just defeat their army. They exiled the people who sustained the vision of the nation. They knew that they had to defeat more than armies. They had to destroy the vision, the dream of the people. This is how the Israelites lost their vision for what was possible. Losing hope is one of the worst spiritual pains in life. If we lose our hope, we lose our will to live.

When Rabbi Hugo Gryn (one of Great Britain's most respected rabbis) was a boy, he and his family were imprisoned at Auschwitz. They were Orthodox, and even though it meant even greater danger to them, Hugo's father insisted they observe the Sabbath and the festivals. Hugo remembered until the day he died a time when, to observe the Sabbath, his father took a piece of string and put it in a bit of butter and lit it to make a candle for the Sabbath. Hugo was furious and protested, "Father, that is all the butter we have!" His father said, "Without food we can live for weeks. But we cannot live for a minute without hope."

So, the words of Isaiah come to the people of Israel at a time of great depression. These words were filled with hope. He reminded them of God's presence with them. But the curious thing about Isaiah's words is that he tells them something that is somewhat of a paradox. He reminds them of the sustenance of the God of old, the God of their ancestors, and at the same time he tells them to let go of the old things. Right after describing God's acts in the past, Isaiah says that they were not supposed to remember the things of the past. They were to remember God's presence with them, yet they were invited to let go of the guilt of the past, the failures of the past, the old systems that were no longer helpful to them, and the old baggage that was weighing them down. This is an amazing invitation for us today. We just like the people Israel are invited to trust in the God of our ancestors, yet we are also invited to let go of the structures, the thoughts, the ways that no longer serve us. And we can do this because we trust that God is doing something among us. God is leading us into a future that we can't even imagine and our first step into that new reality is letting go of the old stuff that weighs us down. We do this because we know that it is not about changing the big vision of our life but maybe just the plans.

This is not about the power of positive thinking or some fad that promises us happiness forever and ever. In a recent book called, *Bright-sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*, Barbara Ehrenreich warns us against such attempts to just mask our sadness and difficulties. She learned about these shallow attempts through her personal experience with cancer. She notes that, "Rather than providing emotional sustenance, the sugar-coating of cancer can exact a dreadful cost. First, it requires the denial of understandable feelings of anger and fear, all of which must be buried under a cosmetic layer of cheer. This is a great convenience for health workers and even friends of the afflicted, who might prefer fake cheer to complaining, but it is not easy on the afflicted... The flip side of positivity is... a harsh insistence on personal responsibility: if your business fails or your job is eliminated, it must be because you didn't try hard enough, didn't believe firmly enough in the inevitability of your success," writes Ehrenreich. "As the economy has brought more layoffs and financial turbulence to the middle class, the promoters of positive thinking have increasingly emphasized this negative judgment: to be disappointed, resentful, or downcast is to be a 'victim' and a 'whiner.'"

The invitation of Isaiah to the people of Israel and to us is not about forgetting our past or our current challenges. It is not about some form of denial of the pain of our experiences. It is rather an invitation to trust that God is doing something new among us even in those times when we can see it. It is about a hope that is not dependent on the circumstances of life. It is hope that is deeper than our experiences of pain. It is the hope that comes from knowing that God is with us no matter what, and even in the worst of circumstances, God is able to bring wholeness and newness to our lives.

Our newest brother in Christ, Harper was baptized today with his parents claiming the promises of God's hope for him for the rest of his life. This does not mean that Harper will not experience pain and loss in his life, but what we pray for is that Harper will always know that he is not alone and that he is always precious to God.

The story is told about a parish minister in the South American country of Chile who was distributing food for the poor of his village. The village was caught in the crossfire of civil war. He was distributing the food which he had been given by friends in North America when he was arrested and sent to a prison in Santiago. The prison was overcrowded. About 150 men were living there. He took over the role of chaplain. He held daily devotions and Bible study for his fellow-prisoners. When he was released the other prisoners wrote their names on his back with burnt matches. It was November and the weather was warm. As it happened he got out without being stripped and searched. So he went to the local Peace Committee. Most of the names - names of people who were listed as having 'disappeared' - were still legible. The names turned up, written with burnt matches on a prisoner's back. The hour of silence was at an end...The names written in black charcoal, became signs of hope. A hope which could not be blotted out by the threat of torture, the terror of silence or even by the softer terror of oblivion.

Our fear of failure, our guilt, our losses, and our pain are all real experiences that we face. Even when we are not personally suffering, we cannot help but experience the pain of others and the pain of those who suffer in our world. All of these experiences can paralyze or demoralize us depriving us of hope. But through faith we know that God is always doing something new in our lives and in our world. The new things of God are never what we expect, but they are always what we hope for. With this assurance we can trust that taking another step in life and continuing the struggle for peace, for justice and for meaning is a worthwhile effort because God is ever ancient and ever new. Amen.