

“The Impossible Dream”  
Isaiah 55:1-9

Last week in the news we heard about the effect of the earthquake in Chile on the whole earth. In addition to the devastation which the people of Chile experienced, all of us have been affected. According to NASA, this quake may have changed the entire Earth's rotation and shortened the length of days on our planet because the axis of the earth has shifted by three inches. This kind of event is a strong reminder for all us of the depth of our human connection and how all of life is dependent on a certain level of harmony among all of our creation. Yet, most of the time, we live life both individually and as communities with a sense of isolation from others. The other may be your next door neighbor or the country on the other side of the planet. What is worse is that we often live in competition with others over resources. The story is told about a young rabbi who inherited a synagogue that had major conflicts. There were different factions and different opinions about everything: the order of the service, who should do what, the language, when people are supposed to sit or stand, and so on. The young rabbi felt helpless and didn't seem to be able to figure out a solution. So, he decided to take a few of the leaders of the different factions to visit the old rabbi and see if they could come up with some ideas to resolve the situation. When they got to the nursing home, the first group asked the old rabbi: “Rabbi, isn't true that at this point in the service we are supposed to stand?” The rabbi answered: “No, it was not the tradition.” The second group asked the same question of the old rabbi, but received the same answer. The third group asked the same question and received the same answer. They tried different questions, but the answer was the same. Finally, the young rabbi spoke: “But Rabbi, what we have now with different sides doing what they want is chaos, bedlam, a mess! There are people standing and sitting, this one reading and that one meditating, and everyone is sure that their way of doing it is the tradition.” The old rabbi looked at all of them and smiled, saying: “Ah! Now that's the tradition!”

It seems that our tradition in the world as human beings is to insist on our own ways and to think everyone else is wrong when their views or interests clash with ours. Achieving world peace seems like an impossible dream for all us, a distant future which may never come!

Yet, in the midst of this we read the vision the Prophet Isaiah for a banquet for all nations. This is a celebration of the covenant of God with the people of Israel. The banquet of the covenant is a free gift from God to the people of Israel. They do not have to pay or do anything to sit at the table. Yet, others are invited to this celebration.

The words of Isaiah must have been both hopeful and offensive at the same time! The people of Israel to whom Isaiah was speaking were living in exile. They had lost their homes, their land and the temple. They were living in a foreign land as refugees. This was after the Babylonian exile. Their country was invaded by a foreign army. In the midst of all of this pain, Isaiah offers hope to a people who had lost hope. He reminds them that God's presence and love are still there for them and that their lives will be restored even as it may seem impossible to them.

At the same time, these words of Isaiah must have been offensive to the people of Israel. Here they were exiled and downtrodden because of the other nations around them. Couldn't Isaiah have skipped the part about the other nations? Couldn't he have been more sensitive to their situation? All the world is invited to God's table of love? Really? What about the ones who just destroyed their way of life and their cities? All the people of the earth are invited? Why can't God side with the Israelites against the others just this once, at least while they are hurt? After all they were the chosen people! But Isaiah was reminding them that their being chosen and the whole purpose of covenant was to redeem not only Israel but also the whole people of the

world. God's scheme was not limited to one nation, one religion, or one set of beliefs or practices.

This was hard for the people of Israel to hear but it is still hard for us to hear. During World War I, Harry Emerson Fosdick published a prayer for the Germans (our enemy in the war). The prayer went like this: "O God, bless Germany! At war with her people we hate them not at all ... We acknowledge before Thee our part in the world's iniquity ... We dare not stand in thy sight and accuse Germany as though she alone were guilty of our international disgrace. We all are guilty." Charles Biddle, an American pilot, responded to Fosdick's prayer by pledging to kill as many "Huns" as he could, saying that "if Christianity requires us to forgive them I am afraid I am no Christian (Church History, March; as quoted in Christian Century, May 5, 2009, page 8). We would rather hear the words of Psalm 23 where the table is prepared for me in the presence of my enemies. They are watching but are not exactly invited to the table. This is based on our experience in life. Often times, if we are not the aggressors in the world, then others will be. It is our human instinct. If we don't protect ourselves, we may end up being hurt by others. Lutheran Preacher, John Stendahl observes that "to live faithfully with God in this covenant means to act and think in ways that will not come naturally to us. That is one reason that repentance is hard work, not automatic and instinctive." We have to learn this way of God's love against all of our natural tendencies. This is not an invitation to be abused or a weakling. It is an invitation to rise above the cycle of hatred and revenge.

The Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama, who was a professor at Union Theological Seminary, died last year. In his tribute to Dr. Koyama, Rev. Donald Shriver Jr. recalled how Koyama, then a teenager in Tokyo, had come close to dying in a U.S. air raid bombings of the Japanese capital during World War II. "Understandably, the Christian minority had hard times in Japan during the war," Shriver stated, "but etched into Koyama's memory were the incredibly courageous words spoken to him at his baptism by the pastor of (his) congregation: 'Kosuke, God calls you in Jesus Christ to love all your neighbors, even the Americans.' The 'even' would become a theological watchword the rest of Kosuke Koyama's life" (Christian Century, May 5, 2009, page 19).

It is easy to envision a banquet of God's love where we are invited. But imagine a banquet where all are invited including those with whom you disagree? Including those who consider you their enemy! Would we want Hitler at that table? Would we want Osama Bin Ladin at that table? God's grace is about compassion extended to all of the world because God's thoughts are not our thoughts, nor God's ways our ways! God's care for the world defies all of our expectations and imagination. And because this does not come naturally to us, we need to learn to allow more of God's presence in our lives so that grace becomes more central in our being.

In his book, *To Heal a Fractured World*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, tells this story, at the third Sabbath meal, as the day grew dark and the mood intense, one of the people turned to the teacher with a question: "Why does the messiah not come?" The rabbi said, "Why do you ask, my son?" "Because, in the past perhaps we were not ready. The world was not ready. The hour was not right. But now, after the Holocaust, and the return of Jews (to the land of our forebears), has the time not come?" The rabbi said, "I will tell you, my son, how could the Messiah come? Consider: If he were a Jew of one sect, the Jews of the other sects would not recognize him. If he were a Jew of any kind, their opponents, would not recognize him. If he were Orthodox, the Reform Jews would not recognize him. If he were religious, the secular Jews would not recognize him. How then can he come? It is not we who are waiting for the Messiah. It is the Messiah who is waiting for us. He has been here all the time. It is we who are not yet ready for him." Before the man could reply, the rabbi continued: "and now let me ask you a question. What would you do if the Messiah did arrive? Would you greet him as a long-lost, long-awaited

friend? Would you not invite him in as a royal guest and do the utmost to pay him honor and be honored beyond measure by his presence?” “Of course,” replied the man. “Well,” said the rabbi, “I will tell you what you must do and teach others to do. Regard every person – familiar or a stranger, young or old, learned or unlearned, observant or unobservant – as if he or she might be the Messiah, for the Messiah will surely come in disguise. If only we would do this, we would find that, without our realizing it, the Messiah had come.”

Lent is a journey towards the darkness of the cross. It is a journey that reminds us of God's presence with us even in the worst of times. The invitation of Isaiah for us on this journey is to open our eyes to God's impossible dream of a world where all work together to live in harmony, peace and justice. May we have the courage to claim the hope of Isaiah's vision! Amen.