

On That Day
Rev. John Allen

There are a lot of questions on a week like this.

One question that I have heard from many of you is a simple one, and a good one.

How can we have hope?

The Milton Interfaith Clergy met this week, and that question was lifted around our table, when we took a moment to note with despair that—in our organization’s files— we now have a document called “Mass Shooting Vigil Template”

How can we have hope?

In a world where the unimaginable has become almost expected. In a world where anger seems so frequently to boil over into violence. Where our nation is gripped by such an intense spiritual sickness. And where we have resigned ourselves to terror, for want of simple moral courage.

How can we have hope?

One of the great gifts of the Bible is that nearly every verse of it was written by someone whose world was falling apart. Whether it is Jesus’ friends after seeing him killed on a cross, or Israel’s prophets watching the people be carried away into exile.

Isaiah’s problem was even worse than that, the nation of Israel was puny compared to neighboring Assyria and Babylon. And those neighbors were on the march. And Israel stood no chance.

The people were hauled away. God’s temple was torn down to the foundation. And the holy hill lay bare, covered by the shroud of death, the city trampled beneath the boots of foreign soldiers.

Imagine these people. These Israelites. Really, imagine them. Not the way they look in old glossy oil paintings, or the soft-focus illustrations in your children’s Bible.

Imagine their faces like the ones we have come to know too well. Fleeing from terror. Crying out for help. Wondering if they will live or die.

How could they have hope?

In their world, where walls that once felt impenetrable were crumbling before their eyes. Homes they had possessed for generations, aflame. A sight beyond their imagining, but now somehow real before their eyes, the temple, in ruins, the holy city laid bare.

How could they have hope?

Those people. In that moment. Turned to their prophets. And Isaiah offered a vision.

A vision that God would shelter the helpless. Shading them from the blast of the ruthless, like the clouds subdue the heat. That God would swallow up death forever.

A stunning vision, of God stretching out a feast before them more lavish than any they had ever known.

A vision of God's own hand wiping each tear from every human face.

It was a beautiful thought. A glimpse, perhaps, of the very world that God desired, where death was no more and the people knew only peace.

But these people weren't stupid. They weren't naive. And they had no more use of fairytales than we do.

That world never came to be. Suffering continued. Death marched right along. The tears flowed. Not just through their lives, but all the way up through human history until this very moment.

So was Isaiah wrong? Well, not exactly. See, the prophets never meant to predict the future. They are not fortunetellers or oracles. Their role is not to foresee the course of history.

What do prophets do?

Prophets plant the seed of God's vision in human hearts, so deep that it can never be removed.

Prophets cultivate our dreams until they become so real they cannot be shaken.

Isaiah's prophetic vision is not a forecast of the future for us to sit back and await.

It is an itch. It is the very thing by which we measure the world and find it wanting, by which we are motivated to step forward, time and time again, because we desire, so deeply to live in this world God imagines.

The prophetic vision is placed in our heart so that we will never be deceived into believing that injustice and tragedy, are inevitable.

Instead, with God's dream in our hearts, we will see each act of violence, each word of hate, each callous indifference, each injustice for what it is. An intolerable departure from the world our God envisions.

And that, that is how we hope.

Not passively as people awaiting rescue.

But passionately, as people whose hearts know another way, and whose bodies cannot rest until it is made real.

Amidst one of the most trying moments in the Civil Rights movement. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stood before a crowd and said:

“I know you are asking today, "How long will it take?" Somebody's asking, "How long will prejudice blind the visions of men. How long will justice be crucified, and truth bear it?"

He continued saying, “I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because "truth crushed to earth will rise again.” How long? Not long, because "no lie can live forever.” How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. How long? Not long, because: Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. His truth is marching on. Glory, Hallelujah. His truth is marching on.”

And King was smart enough to know that it would take a long time to heal the racism at this nation's foundation. He may have even been able to anticipate that racism would still haunt our country to this day.

But he was also faithful enough that he could not ignore the vision God had planted in his heart. The prophetic seed had set its roots in his spirit and it burst out through him everywhere he went.

He was not predicting the future. He was telling the truth. Giving voice to God's own hope in a way that was so compelling, that you heard it, it would never let you go.

That is what a prophet does.

So I want to offer you a few highlights. From the visions of our tradition's great prophets.

Remembering that they are not describing some new world that will be lowered down from the heaven. But rather they are pointing us toward that world God is creating, so that we can get on board.

I want you to hear these words and let this vision take root in your heart so firmly that we could stand with hope. Unflinching even in the face of evil, even with tears welling in our eyes, even with our words caught in our throats.

The wolf shall live with the lamb,

the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion together,
and a little child shall lead them.

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast.

And God will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
God will swallow up death for ever.

Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the sins of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the Lord has spoken.

And all people will beat their swords into plough-shares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they study war any more.

And on that day, we will say.

This is our God;

This is the Lord for whom we have waited;

Let us be glad and rejoice in God's salvation.