

“Keep Hope Alive”
March 23, 2025
Scripture: Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

In a recent article in the on-line publication The Bulwark, which was started by a group of conservative journalists and political consultants in opposition to the Republican Party's embrace of the current president, I read a reference to the British conservative political philosopher Roger Scruton. The writer quotes Scruton as saying conservatism starts in “the sentiment that good things are easily destroyed, but not easily created.” I think that's the challenge the people of Israel returning from exile in Babylon were facing. How do you create a new society when the old one has been interrupted or dismantled for fifty years? Isaiah is speaking to that generation of Israelites. He's speaking to people who are burdened with the task of creating something good after terrible devastation.

We can find a glimpse of what that was like in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra was a priest who was overseeing the rebuilding of the temple. Once the foundation was laid nothing much happened, the work stalled for a long time until Ezra motivated them to finish it and began putting together a new government. But there were still problems. The last two chapters of Ezra tell about his discovery that many of the returned exiles had married women who were foreigners and had families with them. Ezra decreed that these families were to be broken up. The book ends with the mass deportation of the foreign wives with their children, presumably the offspring of the men who married them, from Israel. This was seen as the only way to regain God's favor.

Isaiah seems to represent a different view of this. In this passage we hear God calling anyone who thirsts or hungers to come to the feast and enjoy God's love. There's no requirement of ethnic purity. It's all about motivation and intention: “Let the wicked forsake their ways, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.” For Isaiah rebuilding a new society meant a wider embrace of anyone willing to devote themselves to God and accept the abundance God offers. What we find is God's favor straining to burst the dam of fear and exclusion leaders like Ezra want to construct.

This is a longstanding debate or controversy in scripture. The question is asked over and over: Is God meant for Israel exclusively, so their job is to keep themselves pure or is God meant for the world, so Israel needs to open itself to welcome the world as a beacon? Isaiah believed an open and accepting Israel, where all are welcome to the feast is God's desire.

We're experiencing a similar controversy in our country today. In the news we've heard about the recent deportation of men who had been detained to what's essentially a blackhole of a prison in El Salvador because they're suspected of being members of a Venezuelan gang. No hearings, no trials, just detention and deportation. According to one lawyer who represents one of these men, her client is a makeup artist who is gay and came seeking asylum to escape violence in Venezuela. He had a hearing scheduled but was taken before it happened. Now she can't communicate with him at all. Whatever process was in place to adjudicate these cases, even

though it was slow and cumbersome, has been effectively dismantled, a good thing easily destroyed.

Where do we go to find insight into a faithful response to a situation like that? Not many of us are likely to be affected directly by the indiscriminate deportation of undocumented people. Do we just shrug our shoulders and assume it will all work out? Or do we try to intervene and inject the possibility of a different way to think about this issue?

When the people around Jesus told him about the incident where some worshipers were killed by Roman soldiers during their prayers, he seems to think they assume those worshipers were asking for it. That's not surprising. A lot of popular theology would say bad things happen to bad people. But he's not buying it. Instead he offers a completely different perspective. What I hear Jesus saying is, "We're all going to die, so we need to do what we can now to change things." I don't think he's threatening them to "repent or perish." I think what he hears in their concern is despair and he's offering them hope. Hope lies in our capacity to change. I'm reminded of Mary Oliver's poem "The Summer Day" that ends with the question, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Hope means we have choices when we're faced with overwhelming circumstances. We can choose how we respond. The people around Ezra could have chosen to embrace their newfound diversity and welcomed foreign people into the circle of love and compassion Isaiah describes. In their despair they chose to destroy families rather than keep hope alive. Like the owner of the fig tree Jesus describes, they found it easier to tear something up rather than nurture it and bring it to health.

In that story it sounds like a deadline, one year and no more, but I don't think that's the point. I think Jesus is addressing our tendency to allow our hopelessness get the better of us and react destructively rather than creatively; instead of tearing it all down, what can we do to build it up, make it more fruitful? How do we keep hope alive in the face of despair?

Sometimes it feels like it's too late. Things have gone so completely out of control that nothing we do can help. That's how Ezra felt, I suspect. Better to deport everyone who's considered a problem than try to assimilate them. Better to be pure than compassionate. I'm reminded of a quote from Anne Frank's diary where she wrote: "How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world." Or Martin Luther King who told an audience at Oberlin College "The time is always right to do what is right." Keeping hope alive means doing what we can to confront the forces of hatred and fear and exclusion with compassion and acceptance. We are not powerless in this moment. We can make a choice to repent, to turn away from the path of destruction and embrace a vision of wholeness and peace.

That means in the face of indiscriminate deportations we advocate for due process and fair hearings. We insist on knowing who's being detained and what their conditions are. We call on our leaders to follow the rule of law and obey court orders. And we stand alongside those who are being targeted because of who they are or where they're from or what they believe or who they love. We can make a choice to make a difference even in this moment when it feels like nothing we do will matter.

Despair leads to destruction. Despair leads to a world where justice is meaningless and God's vision dies. Our job is to keep hope alive. That's what I hear from Isaiah and from Jesus. I hear them telling us across the eons to stay strong and commit ourselves to hope. We have the power to bring the world into alignment with God's vision of abundance and peace, to nourish the soil around the fig tree so it produces fruit for all to share.

*For everyone born, a place at the table,
For everyone born, clean water and bread,
A shelter, a space, a safe place for growing,
For everyone born, a star overhead.
And God will delight when we are creators of justice
And joy, compassion and peace:
yes, God will delight when we are creators of justice,
justice and joy.*

Keep hope alive and don't despair. God is counting on us to change the world.

Amen