

*Holy Possibilities*

Isaiah 40:1-11

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Toward the end of the movie, *Star Trek II*, the starship Enterprise finds itself in grave danger. The arch villain, Khan, is up to his old tricks again. The future looks dark and foreboding. Suddenly Mr. Spock steps forward. Spock, in case you didn't know, is a Vulcan. He possesses a superior intellect. Rather than getting caught up in excitable emotions, he solves problems with calm reasoning. But now, with their backs to the wall, Spock isn't sure what to do. He nobly volunteers to sacrifice himself in order to save the Enterprise. And as he does, he speaks words that sound less like calm reason and more like hope: "There are always possibilities."

Israel has been stuck in exile in Babylon for close to 50 years. They've been forced to pick up the pieces of their broken lives and start all over again in a strange land. They've had to endure the chiding of prophets who've told them over and over again that the exile was caused by their unfaithfulness to Yahweh. The future looks dark and foreboding. One day a new prophet comes on the scene, a prophet in the line of Isaiah. His words cause quite a stir: "Comfort, comfort, my people," he says, "You've suffered enough. The penalty is paid. Prepare the way of the Lord." In so many words, Isaiah is saying, "It's time to go home." According to Isaiah, there are always possibilities.

What do you think? Are there always possibilities? In a world in which the future often looks dark and foreboding, that seems like a tall order. Maybe it depends on how we define *hope*. At times we equate hope with an optimistic outlook on life—the clouds will lift, the pain will heal, the economy has got to get better. At other times hope is the confident expectation that our longings will be fulfilled. *The surgery should get it all. The interview should lead to a job. The apology should lead to reconciliation.*

There are still other times, though, when an optimist outlook and confident expectations ring hollow. At times like these, we feel like we're stuck in Babylon, and there's a thousand miles of desert between us and home. T. S. Elliot develops this idea. He suggests that the desert is not necessarily found in some faraway and exotic place, but rather in the human heart. Like those on a journey, we move on sand. There are dreams and visions we have about our careers, our relationships, our children; dreams and visions

of the mark we want to make on our world. Says Elliot: So often these dreams dissolve like a mirage in the simmering heat of not enough time, not enough money, not enough courage, not enough of God-knows-what.

Then what do we do? What do we do when our backs are to the wall and there's no way out? We might want to spend some time reading our Bibles, because on page after page of scripture, God's people regularly find themselves in the most challenging of predicaments. Israel wanders in the wilderness for 40 years and it feels like it's never going to end. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego get thrown into a fiery furnace because they refuse to bow down to King Nebuchadnezzar's gods. Isaiah ends up preaching to a bunch of world-weary exiles and it sounds like the craziest thing in the world.

"Listen," says the prophet, "sometimes God is up to something so amazing that you can't begin to conceive of it. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low. The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together. God will do it!"

What I'm saying is this: if you want to get to the bottom of hope in the Bible, you'll need to go beyond a sunny optimism that everything's going to work out just fine. And you'll need even to go beyond a confident expectation of your longings being fulfilled, because sometimes that fulfillment is anything other than obvious. No, sometimes you'll need a hang-on-for-dear-life-because-I-don't-know-what-else-to-do kind of trust. And the only place to put that trust is in the God who specializes in rescue operations. Indeed, God seems to operate best when our backs are to the wall and there is no way out.

Our theme for Advent is *Experiencing the Holy*. Last Wednesday at worship we spent time in silence, waiting and praying that God would come and speak to us. If we stop to listen, who knows what we might hear. If we're very, very still, maybe we will hear a voice as sure and strong as the Ancient of Days. Maybe that voice will cry out: "Here is your God. He will feed his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in his arms." Isaiah promises that God will move toward us with the unflagging step of one who is passionately in love with us and who never fails to respond to our needs.

There are always possibilities. Is it true? I think it is, but not necessarily according to our timetable and according to our plans. Remember, Israel waited 50 years

for God to come. We sometimes have a hard time waiting 50 minutes. If we're going to be about the business of biblical hope, we may have to cultivate our waiting skills. We'll need to be reminded over and over that God is passionately in love with us. We'll need to learn to trust that sometime, somewhere, somehow, God will come and help us.

There are always possibilities. What do you suppose that might mean? A few years ago, during the break-up of the Soviet Union, Vaclav Havel was leader of the Czech Republic. He spoke words of hope as he challenged his beleaguered people to dare to dream dreams of a new future. He encouraged them, rather than simply looking for hope in the most positive scenarios, to spend time looking inside. "Hope is a state of mind," said Havel, "not a state of the world. Either we have hope within, or we don't. It's a dimension of the soul." Then Havel made an especially salient point: "Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but *the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.*"

That's a powerful statement. It goes beyond optimism. It goes beyond confident expectations. Havel is saying that hope is not necessarily about something going our way, but rather about something finally making sense. And to add a biblical dimension, it's about Someone who helps it make sense.

I recently got an email from a man named Ken Yoder. He shared a story with me—a story of hope—in which he tried to make sense of the last couple's years of his life. Ken Yoder lives in Elkhart, Indiana. 2010 was not a good year for him. He had problems with stamina, severe headaches, an inability to focus at work. This led to several trips to the doctor. There were lots of questions and worries and prayers. His doctor eventually threw up his hands and sent him to the Mayo Clinic. After a series of tests, Yoder was diagnosed with something called Sarcoidosis which is a chronic disease involving lesions in the lungs and bones and brain. Yoder was obviously very sick. His type-1 diabetes only complicated things. As he lay in the hospital at St. Mary's, his world felt more and more dark and foreboding.

One day Yoder saw a poster at the hospital advertising Zumbro's Lessons and Carols. He noticed the theme, *The Light Shines in the Darkness*. He decided he really wanted to go. It took some doing, but he eventually got permission from his doctor. He came dressed in hospital clothing and sitting in a wheelchair. While he was there, he

heard a refrain spoken again and again, “The light shines in the darkness,” and he responded along with the congregation, “And the darkness has not overcome it.”

About midway through the service, after hearing the refrain yet again, he heard a voice. It spoke clearly to him, “Ken, do you see that this was one reason I brought you to Rochester just now?” Yoder writes: “Dressed in hospital clothing, sitting in a wheelchair, in a beautiful marble and stained glass chapel, I struggled with tears. Silently my soul answered, ‘Yes, Lord.’”

Looking back, Ken Yoder describes his experience at St. Mary’s as a “God thing.” A little bit of light shined into his dark and weary world. It was a God thing. He wasn’t—and still isn’t—sure what the future holds, but suddenly the last couple of years of his life made sense to him. And he learned, on his journey through the wilderness, that somehow, somewhere, someday, God will come and help him.

There are always possibilities. That’s what Mr. Spock and the prophet Isaiah and Ken Yoder are asking us to believe. It isn’t easy to believe. It isn’t easy to have hope, especially when our backs are to the wall. In the end, I think, hope is as much a choice as anything. We choose to trust that somehow, somewhere, someday, God will come and help us. And even if that help isn’t exactly what we’re expecting, we trust that God will make sense of it all. Amen.