

Sunday, November 17, 2013
Promise of Healing – the Promise of Life
Isaiah 65: 17-25; Malachi 4: 1-2a; Psalm 98

Passages of Scripture, like we read from Isaiah, are ones that give us hope.

In them we find ourselves in the midst of re-creation, of new heavens and earth, in which the former things will not be remembered

– i.e., struggles, pain, disease

These things will not even come to mind.

These things that we know so well in our day to day living

– will no longer be our experience

Rather, we will be glad and rejoice forever in what God will create.

Yet, in the midst of all this joy

In the midst of all this hope,

We run into a passage like the one from Malachi 4:1

Where we read of the destruction of the wicked.

We often find in Scripture, in the prophetic texts – the joy of new creation countered with the destruction of the wicked.

Why is this so?

Where is the good news in this?

Who are the wicked anyway that destruction is their reward?

Maybe fewer than we think

- because the wicked has become a catch-all category for too many people, in a world seeking to blame someone for our ills.

That reminds me of one of Chuck Neufeld's songs on his *Even Now* album

It gets at my dis-ease with this carte blanche notion of the destruction of the wicked.

All My Favorite People are Broken

“All my favorite people are broken

Believe me, my heart should know

Some prayers are better left unspoken

I just want to hold you and let the rest go

All my friends are part saint and part sinner

We lean on each other, try to rise above

We are not afraid to admit we are all still beginners

We are all late bloomers when it comes to love

All my favorite people are broken
Orphaned believers, skeptical dreamers, step forward
You can stay right here, you don't have to go

Is each wound you've received just a burdensome gift
It gets so hard to life yourself up off the ground
But the poet says we must praise a mutilated world
We're all working the graveyard shift
You might as well sing along

Cause all my favorite people are broken
As for your tender heart, this world's going to rip it wide open,
It ain't gonna be pretty, but you're not alone

All my favorite people are broken
Orphaned believers, skeptical dreamers, you're welcome
Yeah, you're safe right here, you don't have to go

Cause all my favorite people are broken . . .”

Or Mike Yaconnelli, sharing about his own journeying with Jesus (much how I feel about my own journeying after Christ) in his book *Messy Spirituality*.

He expresses: [Read pp. 10-11] . . .

Yes, in the midst of our brokenness, we hope for the Day when God will make all things new!

But now, right now

- do we sometimes wonder?
- In the midst of our brokenness
- Might I be more like the wicked than the righteous?

What then is to become of me?

The hope of Isaiah, expressed vis-a-vis the wicked, seems a bit callous.

It's like we are all partying over here, celebrating, high-fiving

- but then we see out of the corner of our eye those who are tied up, being taken away to be destroyed.

Is this the price of our renewal? Our hope?

- we win and others lose?

Literally the wicked are described here as evildoers, as arrogant ones, ones who do not honor, worship, revere God.

But that may not let me off the hook so easily

- I know I am still arrogant at times
- Am I one of the wicked?

As I struggle with this and reflect on this

- I notice Malachi 4: 2

- “but for you who revere my name.”

It sounds more like a transition sentence, moving us along to something else of more importance – yet the “but” causes me to slow down and concentrate on what is being expressed.

I began to understand something . . .

I began to understand something about the difference between the wicked, the broken, and the righteous

– there is room for a lot of broken people, messed up people, to receive God’s grace, mercy and hope, rather than to be cavalierly tossed in with the wicked.

And so, there is hope to be found in this phrase: “But for those who revere my name”

So, what might it mean?

If we remember back to when God revealed his name to Moses in the burning bush

– we begin to come to recognize that what God has in mind when God says “for those who revere my name”

In Exodus we discover that God’s name is unpronounceable

– Yahweh – strong similarity with the Hebrew verb for “being,” for “life” – (capital “L” = Life)

– So, could God be saying “for those who revere me, all that I am, all that is Life” (with a capital L)?”

If we begin to understand that worshiping God, honoring God, living in God’s ways is not so much a belief system

– our having all our belief ducks in a row,

But a way of revering God, the One who is the author of Life, the One who is the creator and sustainer of life, the One who is LIFE,

Then we begin to understand that what God is saying throughout Scripture, in the coming of Jesus, in the ongoing ministry of the Spirit in the church, is that God’s agenda embraces us in our brokenness, our messiness, our not getting it right, our stumbling and failing more than succeeding.

That God embraces us in the midst of all of our struggling in making the right choices,

And as God embraces us, God embraces us with the Gift of His Life:

And what we hear God saying to us as God embraces us is: “Choose me, Revere me, Choose Life!”

God knows that we have a hard time “choosing life,” and so that is why the prophets kept **reminding us** of where our choices lead and remind us and challenge us over and over again

– Choose God, Choose Life!

Choosing Life is all about choosing the One who is Life

– the One who is the author and giver of Life

– the One who is the Creator and sustainer of Life.

Too often when we say, Choose God

– we make it about belief.

But when God invites us to Choose Life

– God makes it about living in relationship with the One who is the very essence of Life!

So, the broken, the messed up, the ones who always get it wrong

These are not the wicked ones.

These are the ones Jesus came to set free!

These are ones of whom God sings

– “All of my favorite people are broken”

So then, if the broken are not the wicked, who then, are the wicked?

Simply, those who are opposed to life! – but, understanding this requires some unpacking.

For that we need to go back to Exodus.

Pharaoh is the representation of all that is wicked (along with Satan) in Scripture.

Pharaoh stands in contrast to the life and abundance that God gives.

Pharaoh embodies the “brutal production-consumption apparatus” from which the people of God were delivered (Brueggemann, *Disruptive Grace*, 65).

As Brueggemann notes, “Pharaoh is reckoned in Israel as the icon of antilife” (*Disruptive Grace*, 65).

All that is God – Sabbath, rest, life

Is all that Pharaoh is not.

Therefore, God is not opposed to those who struggle to eke out an existence, seeking life in broken ways – these are in fact the ones God has come to set free.

But God is opposed to those who are opposed to LIFE and the purposes of God.

Wickedness has little to do with right or wrong belief and perhaps even right or wrong behavior,

Rather, wicked ones, are ones who opt for all that is opposed to life, to God.

The way I see it, broken people are not opposed to life, they are struggling to make life work for them in broken ways, selfish ways, seeking life for themselves, thinking that there is only a limited amount of Life to go around.

And so they take, rather than being able to give!

The wicked are different

They are the ones whose hero is Pharaoh, Who opt to destroy Life, are opposed to Life.

These are the ones who oppress, who enslave, who neglect the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the alien.

These are the ones who do not seek life, but take life, **not to sustain themselves, but just to have power over life.**

These are the ones whom Jesus said have come to steal, kill, and destroy (cf. John 10:10)

(Yet, in stating this, even in this, I believe that many who oppress, enslave, neglect, steal, kill, and destroy are more broken than wicked, **because** they see no other option to eke out life, for themselves, but to take it from others in broken ways.

They regard life as a commodity, rather than a Gift, but they value life.

Wicked ones do not value life, and hence God who is Life.

Yet, grace, mercy, forgiveness, and Life are gifts God gives, gifts that God pours out upon all who are broken. Can even the ones who seem to be wicked be saved?)

In the midst of all this we discover a promise.

“But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings.”

The promise is that life always prevails;
God always prevails!

Life overcomes all that is anti-life.

That is the reality expressed through the life, ministry, cross and Resurrection of Jesus.

Death, consumption, all that opposes life is unable to reign.

The One who is Life and those who rely on the One who is Life
– these are all the ones for whom the promise of life is given, even in the midst of our brokenness, our messiness!

Perhaps the ones who are wicked **are the ones who choose to remain wicked**, do not choose life, even in broken ways.

When they come face to face with life, they still opt for death.

**And that is where our being missional, our ministry, our witness comes in
– as broken people who have been embraced by Life, by the life of God, by God.**

Our calling in the world as God’s people, as the body of Christ

- is to live out the reality of God’s Life
- to make Life visible in the world
- so that even those who are labeled “wicked,” may even now, have the opportunity to be embraced by the Life that is God
- to respond to the gift of Life given to them.

When I think of our participating with God in God’s mission in the world

- I come to realize we are not called to create a bigger group of “believers”
- We are called to create a bigger group of “livers,” “ones who are alive, ones who embrace life and are embraced by the Living and Loving One.
- Ones who comes to discover life as a gift, rather than a commodity
- That there is enough life to go around – for ALL!

Though being embraced by the Life of God leads us to Believe in Life, to believe in God,

Yet, we are called to more
– we are called to display the reality of Life, the Life of God, the transforming Life of God in a world **that keeps on opting for death.**

Perhaps the only way to change our world, to participate with God in re-creating the world,

is for us, who are called by God, to so live our lives before a watching world,

That all humanity may come to seek, to embrace, to revere Life, for all to become those “who revere my Name.”

SO, May we live out fully the life God has given us in Jesus Christ, in the power of the Spirit, as the people of God in the world,

SO, that when Christ returns,

there would be not one who can be identified as “wicked!”

But, rather, may it be true,

that all have the opportunity to respond to God’s embrace of them, to choose Life, to receive the promise and gift of life

And then we will see the hope expressed by the song sung by the early Christians sang: “that at the name of Jesus

– the author and sustainer of Life

“every knee should bow . . . and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is the author and Lord of Life, **to the glory of God the Father – the creator and sustainer of all that is LIFE!**”