

Imagine With God

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Text: Isaiah 36:1-3,13-20,37:1-7,2:1-4

I've heard it said that if America's national pastime is baseball, our second national pastime is judging other people's parenting. I've been on the receiving end of that pastime, and it wasn't any fun, so I try to exercise compassion these days, and withhold judgment from real-life parents like myself, because we're all just doing the best we can.

Fictional parents, though, are fair game—I think because they give us a way of reflecting on our own values and choices. So I was a big fan of the TV show *Parenthood*, which ran for six seasons. It was a show about kids and their parents and the parents of the parents (and on occasion, one parent of a parent of a parent), so there's plenty of fodder for judgment and critique, and it's all fictional characters so no actual humans were harmed in the production of this series, etc.

Anyway, one particular episode featured a story line about Max, a teenaged boy, who boldly declares his love to a young woman he's interested in, but it turns out she's not so interested in him. He runs out of the building and across traffic, pursued by his mother (who is also the principal of the school, for reasons too complicated to get into here). And when she catches up with him she praises his courage in expressing his feelings, which I thought was good, but then she says something I wasn't so sure was wise. She said she was sure that very soon he would find someone who felt the same way about him. I'm not sure I would have made that promise. Some people find someone they love who loves them, and some don't, for a lot of different reasons. Be kind and be a friend, son. Be courageous and willing to let your heart get broken. You'll always have my love, and the love of our family. Say all of this, for sure! But you can't promise the love of another person you don't know. You can't, as a parent, offer a future that isn't yours to give.

How do you walk the fine line between hope and false hope? When you're faced with growing pains or anxiety about your life and the world around you, what allows you to look past a sad or frightening or dissatisfying present to a better future? What do you say to yourself if you're looking for work for weeks or months on end? How do you reconcile headlines about war and climate change and political dysfunction with the future you want for your kids? How do you hold out through grief over the loss of a loved one or a relationship? Some historians have tried to find and present a "usable past"; but how do you find a usable *future*? What kind of imagination about the future gives us passion and courage and hope for living right now, in the present?

King Hezekiah and his people need hope. They need a different vision of the future, because the future they can see right now doesn't look very good at all. The city of Jerusalem is surrounded by the Assyrian army. An Assyrian military official has come to taunt them. We know this is psychological warfare, because if he wanted to parlay, if he wanted to discuss terms with the city's leaders, he would have spoken Aramaic, the international language of diplomacy known to Jerusalem's rulers and

officials. But he doesn't speak Aramaic. He speaks Hebrew, addressing his words to the soldiers manning the city walls. "Don't trust in Hezekiah and his God," says the Rabshakeh. "Don't think the God of Hezekiah can save you. Just look at our track record. Look at how we leveled Samaria and the other nations we've conquered. They prayed to their gods, and not one of them was spared. What makes you think your nation, and your God, will be any different? So here's the deal I'm offering: You surrender the city, and we let you live. You get to go home one last time before we deport you all into exile."

The Rabshakeh has facts and history on his side. If you're defending Jerusalem and you approach this situation looking for a usable past, it's an easy call. You surrender the city. You take your chances with the Assyrians. You grit your teeth and prepare for the hard reality that you're going into exile and never coming home. Hezekiah is being completely reasonable when he starts to think this is the end of his kingdom. He sends word to the prophet Isaiah, saying, "Offer a desperate prayer to *your* God." (Not *my* God or *our* God, Hezekiah says, but *your* God, so far have his hopes fallen.)

But Isaiah has seen a different vision of the future of Jerusalem. Nations will stream to the city, not to attack it, but to be schooled in the ways of Jerusalem's God. Instruction (or Torah, in Hebrew) will go out from the city into every nation, and the lives of all peoples will be lived out under God's rule and ordered by God. They are going to put God in charge, says Isaiah, and as a result there will be no more need for weapons or warfare. The implements of war will be turned into tools of agriculture, no longer shedding blood but feeding hungry mouths. As for the king of Assyria, who dared to make light of the power of the living God, he'll give up the siege and return to his own land, where he'll fall by the very sword he puts such stock in.

This is miles apart from what they are experiencing in the present. If any human being offered this vision out of their own imagination, we'd have to dismiss it outright. It's nonsense, it's pie in the sky. It could never happen. It's only because the vision comes from God, the same God who made a way through the sea, who fed the people in the desert, that Isaiah and Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem can lay hold of it. Only God has the ability and the authority to do a new thing, to break with history and experience and everything we've come to expect, to take us in a new direction. God can not only promise a new future for us, but create that future as well.

A different future doesn't immediately change the present, but it changes the way we live in it. The message for Hezekiah and his people was, "Don't be afraid. Hang tough. Stick it out. You'll make it through." And they did. We know from history that in this case, their hope paid off. The siege was lifted, and King Sennacherib was killed in his own land, by his own son. But there was no way to know any of this would happen in that moment when the Rabshakeh stood with his army at the city walls. God's promise contradicted experience and reason, but the lives and homes of the people who trusted in it were saved.

The year our church will be participating in the Angel Tree Project again, as we do every year. We hear from parents who are in prison, and we do our best to help them provide gifts to their kids, because it's a heartbreaking thing to be apart from your mom or dad on Christmas morning. Sometimes the families are in Newark or Paterson, and sometimes they are located nearer to us, in we'll be working with are very near to us—families in Mahwah and Lyndhurst and Hackensack.

But as we do this very concrete thing for these neighbors, we might also take a moment to realize just how many families are in this heartbreaking situation. According to Pew Research, in 2021, out of every 100,000 adults in our country, 810 were in prison

or jail. That's down from a peak of 1000 per 100,000 in 2008, but it's still the highest level of incarceration for any nation we have data for.¹ Or to put it another way, we've got 4% of the world's population, and 20% of the world's prisoners. And the reasons for that are complex, and wrapped up in how we as a country feel about drugs and punishment and race. But the consequence is that there are a *lot* of heartbroken families on Christmas morning.

So how do we address that heartbreak, the heartbreak of the families we're going to serve and the heartbreak of two million other families? What do we say and do? Do we start with the reality of so many prisoners and laws and courts that are going to keep doing what they do? Do we let those facts and that history first and foremost affect how we feel about and respond to this situation? Or do we start somewhere else? Elsewhere in the book of Isaiah there's a promise, a promise that's taken up and repeated in the New Testament book of Revelation, that God will wipe away every tear (see Isaiah 25:8 and Revelation 7:17; 21:4). Heartbreak and separation and grief aren't part of the world God is making. And so maybe it's our job, as people who believe in that future, who trust in the God who has the right and the power to promise that future—maybe it's our job to bear witness to that future by bringing as much of it into the present as we can, helping to shoulder the burdens that separated families bear. And maybe the heartbreak is catching enough that it makes us want to do something about the systems that produce it. But the point is that you start with the future, the future God creates and promises, and let it draw you through the present.

And that's true whether we're looking at the brokenness out there or the brokenness each of us carries with us. In the future that belongs to God, our tears are wiped away. The hurt that we've done to others and the hurts that have been done to us are not only forgiven, but made whole. How does living in the hope of that future change the way you feel about someone who's hurt you? How does it change how you feel about the words you regret saying or the ways you've let others down? How does it change how you see the small opportunities for kindness each of us faces every day?

"You are the light of the world," Jesus says in our gospel lesson this morning. "A city built on a hill cannot be hid." We've been given a new future, but the way we live with that future isn't just about us. The way we claim God's future here and now is there for others to see. And it might be that for some person you know, the only gospel, the only good news, that person will ever "read" is the way you lead your life. What does it look like for you to claim the hope you've been given in a way that shows, that bears witness to the new thing God is doing in your life and in the world?

So imagine that new thing. Imagine with God, whose imagination once turned darkness into light. Imagine with God, who in Jesus makes a new beginning for us all. Imagine with God, whose Spirit whispers undreamed-of possibilities and hopes. Imagine with God, God whose imagination and hope and will not only describe but make a future that is real and lasting. Imagine nations at peace. Imagine tears wiped away. Imagine God's presence as powerful and perceptible as the sun shining down on us. And let God's imagination carry you through times of sadness and anxiety. Let it give you hope that others can see. Let God's imagination create in you the future God promises. Amen.

¹ John Gramlich, "America's incarceration rate falls to lowest level since 1995." Pew Research Center. 16 Aug 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/08/16/americas-incarceration-rate-lowest-since-1995/>.