

## Optimism vs. Hope: The Difference

Isaiah 65: 17-25 & Luke 21: 5-19

33<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 18<sup>th</sup> November 2007



"Angelus Novus", Paul Klee, 1920

In 1920, two years after the end of the Great War, the Swiss-German artist, Paul Klee (1879-1940) painted his famous piece, "Angelus Novus," "New Angel." Klee lost many friends in the war and was himself conscripted. The German Jewish philosopher, Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), one of the leading lights of the last century, purchased the "New Angel" in 1921, and it remained one of his prized possessions. It was a kind of muse that inspired his extensive writings on the philosophy of history. In 1940, just months before his own death, Benjamin explains why this painting fascinated him for so long. He describes it this way: "Klee...shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise [Paradise being in the past]; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From Benjamin's *Illuminations*, cited in Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, *Hope Against Hope: Christian Eschatology at the Turn of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 23. Benjamin is perhaps known most for his posthumous work, *On the Concept of History*, or *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (*Über den Begriff der Geschichte*).

It's not an optimistic or even hopeful view of history, with the wreckage and carnage of the past, the carnage of progress piling up before History's feet, with his back to the future, a future the angel of history cannot envision. This might not be how you view the past, and it's by no means the full story, but you have to admit it's fairly accurate. We might use the word optimism today and maybe even believe in progress, but we must ask, on what grounds? Politicians wax eloquently about the better days they will bring, but in our skeptical age, who really believes them completely? They make promises that are often broken before Election Day.

Ours is the Age of Skepticism, guided and ruled by a "hermeneutic of suspicion,"<sup>2</sup> *hermeneutics* being a fancy word for interpretation. That is, we suspect that the truth is always hidden, obscured, elusive, and we're suspicious of everyone and everything, making it very difficult to trust anyone or anything, like the truth. This is the interpretative lens through which we see everything, it seems. The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann believes in this spirit of suspicion we have "banished promise from our world," and I think he could be right,<sup>3</sup> It's very difficult to be optimistic about the future without such a view becoming fantasy or a cruel joke. I recently heard a commentator say this we are living through one of the five worst moments in United States' history. So instead of focusing on the promise of the future, we have turned to the moment, to present circumstances, to now, seeking after immediate gratification. "The polar ice caps will not melt *today* and all we have is today, "we might think. However, "When promise is banished and circumstance governs," Brueggemann writes, "we are most likely left with nothing but despair."<sup>4</sup> So what grounds do we have to believe in grand promises about the future?

As one of the most insightful thinkers of our age, George Steiner (b. 1929), has said, "The period since August 1914 has been...the most bestial in recorded history."<sup>5</sup> I don't have to list all the wars, holocausts, tortures, and killing-fields of the twentieth century to prove his point. If only this millennium had kept that

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<sup>2</sup> The term is often associated with the French Protestant phenomenologist philosopher, Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005). "Hermeneutics" from the Greek *hermeneia*, meaning interpretation.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 173.

<sup>4</sup> Brueggemann, 173.

<sup>5</sup> George Steiner, *Errata: An Examined Life* (1997), cited in Bauckham and Hart, 15.

history in the past, but it's piling up at our feet. Despite the fact that we have not been attacked since 9/11 does not mean the United States, or the world, are any more secure. Beyond wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, think of the thousands who have died from hunger, disease, poverty, and natural disasters. Add to the list the fear of Islamic fundamentalists with nuclear capability and the real and present danger posed by global warming at an accelerated pace. You might have read the dire, disturbing warning made by a United Nations panel this weekend meeting in Valencia, Spain.

These are all "big issues," that don't directly affect most of us on a daily basis. But on a personal level, people are concerned about the future, worried about the stock market and the cost of their mortgage and the rising cost of utilities. People are worried for their children's future. There is anxiety in the air – sometimes it's almost palpable. Friends who are psychologists tell me they see it in their practices. Fear governs our lives. It's difficult to trust, it's tough to believe in any promises. People are searching for meaning and purpose in a time such as this, compounded by the fact, if Bruggemann is right, we have "banished promise from our world."

All of this comes close to home for us, the church: *for how on earth can we honestly, sincerely talk about hope in an age such as ours where people have little grounds for hope? How do we talk about hope with integrity? What gives us the right?* Or, to push this a little further, when we Christians talk about hope, is it only just a synonym for being optimistic (even if we don't really have any grounds to be optimistic), of having blind faith? There are many who would say we Christians just dally in wishful thinking. It's little more than a pipe dream. Others say we're not realists. We're out of touch with reality. It's exactly this kind of attitude that makes it extremely difficult for us to read Isaiah 65 and seriously imagine the possibility of this new world Yahweh promises. We might say, "Not in this world. We'll have to wait for all these promises to be filled in another world." But that's not what the text says! All of this will take place here, in this world.

At the end of his very long, influential life, the great prophet and preacher, William Sloane Coffin, Jr. (1924-2006) minister at the Riverside Church in Manhattan for many years and chaplain at Yale, was asked what he thought

about the future. He grew up in a very wealthy family, was involved in espionage after World War II, he had access to very powerful, influential people. He was asked, “Are you optimistic about the future of the world?” “No,” he said. “No, I am not optimistic. But I am *hopeful*.” What’s the difference? A whole world of difference. “Hope has nothing to do with optimism.”<sup>6</sup>

Optimism, along with its partner pessimism - whether the glass is half full or half empty - has more to do with attitude, temperament, and perspective. Some people are naturally disposed to being optimistic, others to being pessimistic. Our attitude or outlook upon the world is often determined by our *experience*. It’s based on evidence – are there good reasons to be one way or the other, what has life taught you so far? We turn to the evidence of our lives as the rationale for how we perceive the world. Based upon how things have been in the past we come to conclusions about tomorrow or the future. Optimism or pessimism is based upon the evidence. It’s generally what drives the stock market and informs how most financial decisions are made (even in the church).

But the Biblical *concept* and *experience* of hope is very different. That we have problems knowing the distinction says something about how we have confused the two. Hope does not rely on evidence, things as they are, but is grounded in something else – *the experience of God*. Coffin once said, “It’s hope that helps us keep the faith, *despite* the evidence, knowing that only in so doing has the evidence any change of changing.”<sup>7</sup>

Where do we find this in the Bible? It’s all over scripture, especially in Paul, but powerfully at work here in Isaiah 65. Our understanding of hope all hangs on one word in this text: *bara’*, create. Stay with me here – this is very significant in the reading of this text. Everything hinges on the use of this word *bara’*. “For I am about to create a new heaven and a new earth.” Found throughout Isaiah and the Psalms, it’s also the word used to describe Yahweh’s creation of the universe. But it has a unique meaning. *This word is only used to describe the particular creative acts of Yahweh*. But it’s also a unique kind of creating.

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<sup>6</sup> William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*, Foreword by James Carroll (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 19.

<sup>7</sup> Coffin, 19.

Take Greg Knauf, for example, our gifted and creative Minister of Music. He's very creative. He's a composer. He uses his creative skills, arranges notes, and produces something new, like an anthem. But Greg really didn't create any of it himself. He didn't create his brain. He didn't create music. He didn't create the piano or the keys on the keyboard. But he makes something new with what is available to him. This is how humans create: working with the creation, which we didn't create.

But *bara'* refers to Yahweh's creative act of calling something *new* into existence that didn't exist before (such as light). It's something entirely new that cannot be derived from *within creation itself*. "It derives from the unlimited possibilities of God's creative power. This makes possible even the new creation of the whole of created reality."<sup>8</sup> *Bara'* means making something new happen that is not contingent upon the created order. It means bringing about a *new* set of circumstances that did not emerge from the past. *Bara'* breaks our enslavement to the insidious formula of "cause and effect," because Yahweh effects things to be that have no prior, evidential cause.

The future, Isaiah tells us, is in God's hands, who is forever creating and recreating something new, doing the unexpected, surprising us at every turn. Think of God doing the unexpected in providing a way out for Abraham at the point of sacrifice. Think of Yahweh preparing a way *through* the Red Sea (not around, which would have been the reasonable way to go). Think of the birth of Jesus – God in the flesh – which was never anticipated. Think of God's surprising and unexpected resurrection of Jesus – that's the strongest grounds for Christians of the God who creates something radically new in startling ways. *Creation cannot yield resurrection! History or Creation cannot yield resurrection. That's the work of God.* We're beyond pessimism and optimism here.

There are countless other moments when the unexpected occurs: look at the dismantling of Apartheid in South Africa through the peaceful witness of the church or the crumbling of the Berlin Wall in 1989, a confluence of events no one had predicted or imagined, but not beyond the possibility of hope (as many in

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<sup>8</sup> Bauckham and Hart, 79. Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 409ff. See also Is. 4:5; 41:20; 45:8; 48:7; 66:22; Ps. 51:10 [12].

churches in both East and West Germany prayed for decades). This means despite how terrible things might be, there's never cause for despair, but great, amazing things can happen in ways unforeseen. The impossible is possible.

The point here is that “this world ‘cannot bear’ the new creation, cannot give birth to it. The potential for or capacity to produce the new does not lie latent within the old, but relies utterly on a *new* work of the God of resurrection.”<sup>9</sup> This is the foundation for Christian hope. Or as Bruggeman says, “The future is not in hock to the present and will not be extrapolated to it.”<sup>10</sup> Neither is the future in hock to the past. God breaks in and does something completely new. *Hope allows us to put our backs to the past and face the future with confidence.* Hope shapes the way Christians live in the world, it's why we can pray for justice and peace, hope allows us to care for one another and reassure one another in difficult times, it even informs how we think about tithing and considering our pledge to God's work here, and how this church puts its budget together and confidently trusts in God's faithfulness.

We might say Isaiah's grand vision here is only idealism or wishful thinking. We're not sure how any of this is going to be fulfilled – and there's plenty in this text completely mocked by our present circumstances. But it's not about us; it's about the new, unexpected thing God will do to bring about the things God has promised in *this* world, when we will not “labor in vain,” and children will be born for calamity, and the “wolf and lamb shall feed together.” *God is faithful! God keeps God's promises* – not in a way we can either anticipate or expect. This is the ground – and the only ground – for hope, and reason to be exceedingly *thankful*.

*Rev. Dr. Kenneth E. Kovacs*

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<sup>9</sup> Bauckham and Hart, 80. The phrase “cannot bear” is from Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God* (1996).

<sup>10</sup> Brueggemann, 446.