November 17, 2013 Norwalk

**Pastoral Prayer**

Generous God, we give you thanks for the layers of blessing that blanket us not simply in this season, but always. We would count them, as the old song advises, but our pens have inadequate ink, our tablets have too little paper, and the clock has too few hours to complete the list. All we know is blessing; perhaps it suffices to simply speak our gratitude, and live it, and note its most immediate promptings.

Even our concerns emerge from our thanksgivings – our affections, our connections, our aspirations for ourselves and each other and all of your creation. Hear, then, our prayers for...

For, then, the fruit of all creation, thanks be to God.

For gifts bestowed on every nation, thanks be to God.

For the plowing, sowing, reaping, silent growth while we are sleeping,

for future needs in earth's safekeeping, thanks be to God.

We pray in the name of Jesus, whose gift of life occasions eternal joy; and continue with the words he taught us: Our Father in heaven...

**Isaiah 65:17-25**

*For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord— and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says theLord.*

***Looking Ahead***

A few months ago the country celebrated the 50-year anniversary of the historic “March on Washington” that occurred in August of 1963 when Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his famous “I have a Dream” speech. According to Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger in their book *BreakThrough,* however*,* the “Dream” speech actually followed one that could have been called the “I have a Nightmare” speech – delivered just moments before the more familiar words. The March had gathered hundreds of thousands of people on the Washington Mall in front of the Lincoln Memorial, and perhaps millions of others in front of their television sets. But the day found King in a low mood.

*President John F. Kennedy had just returned from Germany; against the backdrop of the Berlin Wall, he had called for freedom for those living behind the Iron Curtain. On his return, Kennedy asked King to call off the demonstration. “We want success in Congress,” the president said, “not just a big show at the Capitol.”*

*Kennedy’s comment tipped King into a dark mood. The worst manifestations of human nature were on display in the South – bigotry, beatings, cowardice, murder – and King was intent on making sure that white America, Kennedy included, faced up to them. And so, a few minutes before he was to speak, King leaned over to the gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, who had been traveling the country with him, and whispered, “Before I speak I want you to sing ‘I Been ‘Buked and I Been Scorned.’” When Jackson told her stage manager of King’s request, he replied, “We need a song that’s a little livelier than that!” But Jackson did as King requested. “Dere is trouble all over dis world, children,” she sang. “Dere is trouble all over dis world.”*

When he rose to speak, King launched into a frustrated and angry condemnation of the country’s treatment of African-Americans, riddled with the fear that *the march wouldn’t be taken seriously by Congress and the White House. “It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment,” he warned. Those who underestimated the movement’s power, he said, would have a “rude awakening.” It was perhaps the darkest and most discouraged speech King ever gave.*

*But then something strange and wonderful happened. A voice rang out from the back of the dais. It was Mahalia Jackson. “Tell them about your dream, Martin!” She could feel that King had dwelt too long in the dark valley – he needed to bring the crowd up to the sunlit mountaintop. Having heard him give riffs of the dream speech to earlier audiences, Jackson knew just what King needed to do. “Tell them about the dream!” she cried once more.*

*King seemed to address his next line – “Let us not wallow in the valley of despair” – as much to himself as to the crowd. He then pattered – “I say to you today my friend” – and paused, triggering soft applause from the tired audience and buying himself the time he needed to reorganize his thoughts.*

*King then seemed to find the words Mahalia Jackson had tossed him, and he began the new speech. “And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream.” From there King led the hot crowd in a rapid climb out of the valley.*

*“When we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children – blacks and whites, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics – will be able to join hands and sing in the worlds of the old Negro spiritual: ‘Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!’”*

*With the words “Thank God Almighty, we are free at last,” racial integration suddenly felt inevitable.* ***[1]***

What Nordhaus and Shellenberger go on to argue is that it was the “dream” speech that made the difference; not the “nightmare.” They would certainly agree that truth telling is essential – that the failings of the present tense have to be named and confronted. They would vigorously affirm that nothing is served by hiding brokenness or stifling cries or white-washing the timbers that are too rotted to support any desirable form of community. They simply assert that while critique and condemnation may slow and even halt our regression as a people and civilization, it is ***vision*** that finally moves us forward. Truth with a “little ‘t’” must always find itself in service to Truth with a “capital ‘T’”. Vision, which we might call a compelling view of a more desirable destination; or to put it another way, creation’s holy future reaching back to claim and redirect our present. Vision not only helps us to see where we are going; it helps us come to clearer terms with where we are, vis-à-vis that destination.

Years ago, the great British Christian apologist C.S. Lewis observed that *“the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English evangelicals who abolished slave trade, all left their mark on earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world, that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at heaven and you will get earth* *‘thrown in’; aim at earth and you will get neither*.”[2]

So what is the vision that Isaiah places before us? It is, indeed, a portrait of the end, but if you listen closely you will likewise begin to discern the ***palimpsest*** of our beginning. Palimpsest – a kind of visual echo that derives from the ancient art world in which paintings, no longer wanted or, in some cases, no longer tolerated, were scraped or painted over so as to create a fresh surface on which to draw – canvas, after all, being too expensive to simply throw away, and artists, by and large, too poor. But over time, that original image begins to ghost its way to the surface; reasserting itself, as it were, into the new design. A palimpsest – the old and covered over, reappearing in the midst of the new.

And so it is that behind this portrait of God’s intended *end* for the world can be discerned the faint images of its *beginning*:

* a garden where neither disease nor abuse nor neglect nor violence cut short the lives of either the old or the young, but where all grow to live out their fullness;
* where joy was the spirit and delight was the song;
* where jealousy and greed did not corrode the relationships between people and where diligent labor led to good reward;
* where prayer was not specialized ritual but conversation as intimate and common as between a mother and child;
* where the security of well-being was more palpable than the anxiety of threat and fear;
* where the serpents of temptation and self-destruction consume dust instead of human integrity and divine potential.

And I don’t know about you, but just hearing the vision – seeing it take shape in my mind; translating those ideals into present-day applications, I find myself, this Thanksgiving season suddenly more grateful for all the blessings I enjoy than distracted by the allure of all those things I thought I had to have.

* I find myself more appreciative and protective of the lives and dreams of those within my reach, and more awed by and curious about those I have yet to know.
* I find myself more and more impatient with our quibbling about the *mechanics* of insuring access to health care for all – quibbles that frankly seem more about turf protection than health protection – and more determined than ever that we, as a human community, simply insist on it.
* I find myself relishing in my heart the satisfaction and the fruits of work well done, while at the same time lamenting with those countless workers whose 40 hours of labor each week benefit someone, no doubt, but not their own families, because the low wages they’ve earned aren’t enough to elevate them above the poverty line.
* I find myself grateful for all those soldiers and support personnel who risk their lives on battlefields and hostile borders, and more resolute than ever about the necessity for using our ears more than our mouths; about the importance of listening and understanding; about the value of eliciting consent instead of coercing compliance.

God knows it’s easy to name what is wrong, pounding like a hammer on a nail. But I believe Isaiah wants to help us rediscover a glimpse of precisely what “***right***” looks like – to help us see it with our imaginations, to help us hunger for it with our hearts, and with the footsteps of creative action, to help us move forward in its direction.

“Tell them about the dream,” Mahalia Jackson urged Dr. King – and perhaps in our own place and time, urges us. “Tell the world about the dream.” A new heaven, to be sure, but just as C.S. Lewis foretold, a *new earth* thrown in – for it is the vision that moves us forward.

That wouldn’t be a bad vocation, you know: reminding each other, when the nightmares seem far more preoccupying, to tell about the dream; to help ourselves, each other, and indeed the world around us

…to see it;

…to feel it,

…and to reach toward it

…with the same sense of sacred inevitability that animated those marchers in August of 1963; to look ahead and voice thanksgiving:

* for the blessing that is,
* and the grace that is to be.

Thanks be to God.

[1] Ted Nordhaus & Michael Shellenberger. *BreakThrough* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007) pp. 2-3.

[2] Michael Gerson, “The Kingmaker’s New Subject,” *Newsweek* (November 19, 2007) p. 33