

*A Keen Glimpse into the Future  
& The Color of Grace*

Two Lenten Meditations

Isaiah 55.1-9

Luke 13.1-9

Third Sunday in Lent

March 7, 2010

The writers of the New Testament give no description  
of Jesus because it was his life alive inside  
of him that was the news they hawked  
rather than the color of his eyes.

- Frederick Buechner, *The Faces of Jesus* (adapted)

*The Reading from Isaiah*

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. <sup>2</sup>Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. <sup>3</sup>Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. <sup>4</sup>See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. <sup>5</sup>See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you. <sup>6</sup>Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; <sup>7</sup>let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. <sup>8</sup>For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. <sup>9</sup>For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

It is often said that hind sight is 20/20. I'm not sure this old adage is true in all instances, but I think it is certainly true for the life of faith. It is easy for those of us who live 2,000 years after the time of Jesus, for example, to filter everything we hear through the lens of his life. Everything is interpreted through the life and message of Jesus, including prophets like Isaiah, and credibility depends on how well they reflect this gold standard. When we read scripture in this manner, however, it is easy to take for granted the insight into faith achieved by men and

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women who lived hundreds of years before Jesus and, thus, lacked the luxury of his teaching about God and his insight into the life of faith. Rather than appreciate their struggles in faith and the keen glimpses they offer us of what from their perspective was yet to be; we dismiss their insights as dull and lackluster, because they can't hold a candle to the profundity and finality of Jesus and his message.

In the passage from Isaiah shared with us earlier, for example, we hear the rumblings of grace; we hear something of the sheer goodness of God who reaches out to a broken and wounded people with compassion. "Ho, everyone who thirsts," Isaiah says, "Come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!" Look to God for the fulfillment of your needs, Isaiah confirms later in the passage, "...return to the Lord... for he will abundantly pardon."

Isaiah offered a keen glimpse into the future, an insight into what would be transparent in Jesus of Nazareth; our God is a God of grace and compassion. It's not that God somehow became gracious at an undisclosed point in time; it's not that God had to experiment with the most effective way to be God for so many. God *is* grace and compassion; period, end of story. But every woman, child, and man from Eve and Adam on has had a steep learning curve. We, all of us, have had to be convinced that God is gracious. We have had to grow into an adequate understanding of who God is and how much God loves us. Isaiah helped to level off that curve.

Perhaps it's been so difficult for us because of our pride and sense of self reliance. We are taught early in life not to look to anyone for help. We are taught early in life to earn what we receive, to be worthy of the honor we receive, to stand tall and make our momma proud. Bring God into the picture, however, and things get sticky. In matters of faith we cannot earn what God has to give; and we cannot stand as worthy in God's presence, no matter how "good" we think we've been. The healing we need and the wholeness we so desperately seek require God's presence and touch; and we receive that touch always and all ways... as a free and gracious gift.

Hindsight may be 20/20, but our hindsight depends in no small measure on men and women like Isaiah, men and women who offer keen glimpses into who God is and what God envisions for our lives. And what a vision that is!

### *The Reading from Luke*

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup>He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?' <sup>3</sup>No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. <sup>4</sup>Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?' <sup>5</sup>No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.' <sup>6</sup>Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. <sup>7</sup>So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" <sup>8</sup>He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. <sup>9</sup>If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."'

If it said that hindsight is 20/20, it is also said that progress comes in fits and starts. Every two steps forward we take are usually accompanied by a step back. And it appears that Jesus has fallen into this trap. This passage from Luke seems retro; this passage seems to view God in terms of justice and judgment; as a God who seeks a divine quid quo pro, tit for tat, a good faith sacrifice for any expression of good will that is extended.

Let the emphasis fall on the word *seems*. This passage seems to revert to a notion of God that predates Isaiah's God of compassion and pardon. It would be a mistake to understand Jesus and his God on the basis of this passage in isolation. This passage, in fact, illustrates something of what Frederick Buechner says in today's worship heading. It is the light alive inside of Jesus and his teaching that illumines him for us. This passage should be understood in the context of that light, alive and burning in Jesus, which reveals even in this passage a God of grace.

This is one of those passages that give us the heebie-jeebies; one of those passages that make us cringe in fear. After all the talk of grace and goodness, this passage reintroduces a common theme from fear-based religion; repent or perish, believe or burn. When I was a kid back in Birmingham I heard 1,001 sermons on passages like this from evangelists whose sole purpose in life was to scare the hell out of people. They used passages like this to good advantage, but only by stripping it from the context of the life and entire message of Jesus.

When this passage is understood as a reflection of the life alive inside of Jesus, it clearly and quickly changes from threat to promise, from judgment to grace.

The point Jesus makes in this passage concerns the condition for receiving grace – as a gift from God – the same point Isaiah offers a glimpse into. The good religious folk who remind Jesus of the Galileans executed by Pilate in the temple seem to think they deserved what they got. Like Job’s friends, they assume the men had done something despicable to merit such a fate. Jesus simply points out that they all stand on the same footing before God. No matter how *good* these fine religious folk think they are, no matter how *righteous* they think their actions; they receive grace the same way as these men; as a free gift from God, a gift based not on their merit or moral character, but simply on their *need*.

The same is true of the people crushed beneath the tower of Siloam... or beneath the rubble in Haiti or Chile. They didn’t die because they were offensive to good religious folk; they didn’t die because they dabbled in the occult, making a pact with Satan centuries before the earthquake. They died, all of them, in a natural disaster of one sort or another. Jesus finds it ridiculous to divine in such disasters any indication of their spiritual life; and certainly no indication of their merit. Merit, moral achievement, righteous standing before God... none of these ever enters the picture. That is precisely the point. We stand – all of us – before God on the same footing; in need of grace; in need of a gift of life pure and simple.

We stand before God on the same footing; in need of grace. But that is the good news *hawked* in the gospels, as Buechner says. Our God is a God of grace. Our role is simply to turn – the meaning of repent, by the way – our role is to turn toward the grace and receive it as a gift. Then and only then will our lives bear fruit.

Perhaps the best way to understand this passage would be to replace its characters with those from the parable of the prodigal son. The younger son doesn’t return to the favor of his father because of his righteous life style, his profound spiritual life, or his boundless acts of charity. He is gifted with his father’s favor because he turned toward the grace, and received it as a gift.

The older brother is a lot like the good religious folk who remind Jesus of just how bad those sinners must have been to die such deaths. He stands apart, livid with self righteousness,

appalled that his father would stoop so low as to allow this lousy excuse of a man to come home. He too has a choice; he too can turn toward the grace if, and only if, he is ready to receive it as a gift.

The color of grace can be seen in the eyes of Jesus, and the life alive inside him reveals its content. God is a God of grace and goodness who holds out to each of us the opportunity to turn toward grace and receive it as a gift.