

“Save Room For Some Pie”

I

A historical note in this our 150th Anniversary Season: In recent years, the sermon on this particular Sunday has, not always but often, been a “Thanksgiving Alphabet.” Senior Minister David Ruhe, in his characteristically whimsical style, would go through the entire alphabet, from A to Z, and name some source of gratitude beginning with each and every letter. “I am thankful for Albuquerque and bowling balls and creamsicles” and so forth and so on. It’s very clever and people really seem to love it.

They say imitation is the finest form of flattery. So I am *not* going to offer a Thanksgiving Alphabet of my own this year. I wouldn’t want David to let it get to his head. And knowing me, I’d probably forget the letter “Q” and the whole thing would thing would crash and burn.

Besides, there is only one letter that *I* care about this morning. “P” is for “pie,” as in “Pie Sunday.” Pie Sunday, is, of course, our long-standing tradition (now in its second year) in which we celebrate the success of our stewardship campaign by sharing a whole lot of pie. It’s genius, right? I *love* it. I wish every Sunday could be Pie Sunday –but then I’d have to get a treadmill, and I don’t really have room for a treadmill, so I guess we should keep it to just once a year.

In honor of this great and glorious day in the life of our church, I want to talk about pie –not apple or blueberry or lemon meringue, but pie-in-the-sky.

Do you know where that phrase comes from?

Joe Hill was a Swedish born itinerant laborer who came to our shores in 1902. He got active in a social organization called *The Industrial Workers of the World*. He wrote songs for them, actually, including a little ditty called *The Preacher and the Slave*, which satirizes the street corner preachers of the Salvation Army:

*But when [you ask them] how 'bout something to eat
They will answer with voices so sweet:*

*You will eat, bye and bye,
In that glorious land above the sky;
Work and pray, live on hay,
You'll get pie in the sky when you die.¹*

It is a message that the oppressed have heard throughout history: Yes, things are lousy for you right now. But don’t let it get you down! The happiness of heaven trumps the trials of this world. You will get pie in the sky when you bye and bye.

Now, I bring all of this up because I think it may have something to do with our reading from Isaiah 65. These words were first written to an oppressed and miserable people –grandchildren of the exiles who had returned to Israel from their captivity in Babylon.² They had come back with high hopes for a glorious second Exodus –the city rebuilt, the Temple restored, the nation returned to its former glory. With God on their side, they were going to build a new Jerusalem. They came with great expectations.

This, of course, set them up for some great disappointment. The second Exodus did not turn out so well. Here they are, two generations later, in a pretty pathetic situation. Sections of the city wall still lie in ruins. They *have* rebuilt the Temple, but it seems small and shabby and sad. Famine renders life uncertain and insecure. Unfriendly neighbors constantly threaten the tiny Jewish community. Their high hopes have been crushed to the hard earth. Life in the new Jerusalem is not better; it is bleak.³

So what does Isaiah offer them in response? Something that sounds (and smells) an awful lot like pie in the sky:

For I am about to create a new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind...

To hear Isaiah tell it, the problem is not that their vision for the new Jerusalem is too ambitious; it is, if anything, far too small. God is not interested in renovating or repairing the Jerusalem of your grandmothers and grandfathers. God means to make something *utterly* and completely *new*: a completely new heaven, a completely new earth, a whole new world with a whole new order. In God's new world, every last person will know the blessings of safety and security. Infant mortality will be a relic of the past. 90 will be the new 30. No one will ever die in the prime of life. God will be closer than breath itself and the entire creation will be at peace.

Oh, and there will be pie. Lots and lots of pie.

It should happen pretty soon. Any day now. Just as soon as God gets around to it.

II

I can not help but think that these words were written for a far more gullible time. We would never fall for such a grandiose vision. We know better. Hard experience has taught us to be more than a little suspicious whenever somebody offers *us* pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by. I want my pie *right now*. And if I can't have it *right now*, honestly, what is the point?

Come to think of it. I am not sure I even *believe* in pie in the sky. Why should I? I mean, has anybody actually seen this pie? Had a glimpse of it cooling in the kitchen? Maybe caught a little whiff? Anybody? I did not think so. Well, I wasn't born yesterday. Don't expect me to be duped by some preacher spouting nonsense about invisible sky pie. I have to *see* it. And if I can't examine the flaky crust and sniff at the warm gooey filling and try a little sample, don't even expect me to buy it.

We're smarter now. Less gullible. And maybe just a little bit sadder. We have learned to limit ourselves to the stuff that we can see. But you have to admit: sometimes that feels kind of cramped. Just think about the big day on Thursday. What are we *really* thankful for this year? What am I thankful for? Friends and family. A little money in the bank. A roof over our heads. Food on the table. A TV to tune in the game and a couch to pass out on. It seems that I am mostly thankful for the things that I already have; thankful for the stuff I can actually see.

Don't get me wrong: It is better than not being thankful at all. But doesn't it seem kind of...small?

Wouldn't you like to save a little room for some pie?

III

Here is the thing: the vision of Isaiah 65 is not all that unusual. We find stuff like this throughout the Bible. God's people have tended to cherish these glorious visions of the future, even, or especially, when they were living in less than glorious situations.

Walter Brueggemann suggests that, at its core, Israel always lived with a profound theological dilemma –what he calls the deep incongruity between the promises of God and the circumstances of lived experience.⁴ You know how it is: God promises us abundance...but all we see is scarcity; God promises justice...but so many still suffer oppression; God promises peace...but our world is still bent on war. Every single day, we live in the distance between the promises of God and the circumstances of our lives.

How do we learn to live in that distance? How do we manage to cope? A lot of us don't. A lot of us just quit. Slowly, quietly, maybe without even noticing, we allow ourselves the luxury of growing cynical. We scale back our ambitions, diminish our dreams, shrink our hopes down to some more manageable size. Little by little, inch by inch, we give up on the world that God has promised; we resign ourselves to the world that we've got.

But there is another way. When we are reminded of just how far we seem to be from the reign of God, when we are confronted with hard facts that call God's promise into question, we don't have to give up. There is another way. We can just...believe it anyway. Not because of our circumstances but in spite of circumstances. Not because it seems possible, but because God has promised. Not because we think it is feasible, but because God is faithful.

We can do what God's people have always done. We can just believe it anyway.

IV

Is that pie in the sky? I suppose it is, but what is the alternative? Limiting ourselves to the stuff that we can see is tragic. Like an adult child who still lives in mom's basement, we insist on passing all our days in some cramped and dingy corner. And when we live that way—when we confine ourselves to some familiar little world of our own making—well, nothing ever surprises us. Nothing truly new can ever happen. The only thing we even allow ourselves to hope for is pretty much what we have already got –except, you know, *more*.

God loves us too much to let us live like that, to leave us off in some corner. And that is why the Bible is brimming with all of these ridiculous, outrageous, over the top promises. Think of it as God's wrecking ball. Just about the time that we start to settle down in some cozy world we have constructed for ourselves, God suddenly shatters our laughable little notions of reality, breaks everything wide open and drags us out into a much wider world.

You see, that is the power of God's promise. It can offer us something *genuinely new*. Somewhere we got the idea that the future is something *we* have to build or manufacture or muster up out of our own meager resources –like a child trying to assemble the Brooklyn Bridge out of Legos. Somehow we decided that the future will always be more of the same. But that is just wrong. The future is God's new creation – something far beyond our ability to bring about or even imagine, something only God could do. We are talking about, not just a remodeled Jerusalem, but a new heaven and a

new earth; not bigger bombs and better bullets, but a creation set at peace; not a longer life expectancy but an empty tomb.

God's promise has the power to make everything new. God's promise reminds us that we were never meant to settle for anything less.

V

In a world where seeing *is* believing—where instant gratification often isn't instant enough—God is still looking for some pie in the sky people -peculiar people, unwilling and unable to acclimate to the world as it is; people still holding out for the kind of world that God has promised. People still stubborn enough to hope for something better.

Pie in the sky people can seem pretty weird. But they are God's favorite kind of people—the kind of people God always intended us to be.

This Thanksgiving, as we remember and give thanks for all the good things God has done for us, may we have the grace to also remember and give thanks for all the things that God has not done...yet.

In other words: save room for some pie.

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Notes

¹ I know this story must be true because I found it on the internet:

<http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/282700.html>

² A lot of the historical information in this sermon comes from Bernard H Anderson's *Understanding the Old Testament*. Abridged 4th Edition. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998), pp.449-450.

³ See the discussion of Cousar, et al in *Texts for Preaching: A lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV –Year C*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), pp.596-598.

⁴ Brueggemann, Walter. *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), p.172-173.