

Hope and History Rhyme

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The ancient story of the Exodus begins like a big budget action movie. The voice of God, an evil Pharaoh, a worthy hero of the people, plagues, murder and death, the parting of the sea. Then justice and freedom at last for the people of Israel.

Things slow down measurably after that, but the character study in leadership is fascinating. I guess you could say that the story moves from epic action flick to biopic, focusing in on the struggles of Moses as he bumbles his way through forty years of leading in the desert. Forty years of worry and promise, struggle and blessing. Forty years of heartfelt longing, once free, to be home at last, settled in the Promised Land.

The story stretches on.

And then, suddenly it ends. And its ending is not satisfying. Moses leads his people right up to the edge of the land, he climbs a hill and gazes out across the Jordan River at its bounty.

God tells him: "This is the land I have promised. ...I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there." Deut 34:4.

And then Moses dies.

We walk away from the story, grumbling.

We understand it is just one event in the ongoing story of the people of Israel. The next generation will, in fact, cross the Jordan into the land of milk and honey. But still, we are indignant on behalf of the character we have come to know and love.

And below our indignance at the story lies some discomfort, some tickling knowledge of its lasting and universal truth.

We will all stand on mountain tops, looking out into lands we will never enter.

Further, as we understand from decades of conflict over that exact same holy land – conflict raging right at this moment, simply entering the land is not enough. Until there is peace and justice and flourishing for all people, we will never arrive in the true Promised Land.

Thousands of years after Moses, on April 3, 1968, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his last speech, "I've Been to the Mountaintop," in Memphis, Tennessee, and he named the promised land he had seen – of racial justice and dignity for all.

"I've seen the Promised Land," he told his followers. "I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that **we, as a people, will get to the promised land.**"

And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!"

He was assassinated the next day.

And now indignant doesn't begin to cover it. We are heartbroken. We are enraged.

Now, we are no longer spectators. And it's easy to see how we are caught up in that dream, deferred... how our ancestors have dreamed and died for the promise and how we are the next generation who should be crossing the river into the Promised Land.

But we're still straining our eyes hoping to catch a glimpse of it.

And instead we see how we've closed our borders and hearts to Central American Refugees – refusing them our promise, refusing them this land.

And we see children dying by Israeli government missiles in Gaza and by Syrian government nerve gases in Aleppo and by unchecked gun violence in our own towns.

And it's easy to think, alright now God, where is that land? Will we *ever* cross that deep river to the promised land where justice lives and love reigns?

And of course, it's not that hard to imagine our children asking the very same question of us. Perhaps some of them already are.

And it's easy to get very pragmatic about what seems utterly impossible in the span of a generation, and even in the span of human time, and perhaps to find ourselves suddenly navigating the dreaded land of nihilism and despair.

I've been to that land. We have all been to *that* land.

But not only does the position of despair discount the miraculous achievements of countless known and unknown visionaries across the age... it is also too easy.

The vision of Moses and the faith of Dr. King both call us to a position far more complex.

It is a position of prophetic imagination that is both starkly clear-sighted and unrelentingly optimistic.

“I might not get there with you. But we as a people will get to the Promised Land.”

I can't imagine a statement more painfully real and more prophetically hopeful.

And it turns out that holding both things - pain and hope, reality and vision – together in a complex whole may be just what is necessary for true transformation, personally and collectively.

Theologian Walter Brueggemann coined the term Prophetic Imagination in 1978, using it as a title and touchstone for what would become a classic work of theology addressing the practice of the prophets in the biblical text and the work of prophetic imagination in contemporary communities of faith.

Brueggemann defines prophetic ministry as the simultaneous act of criticizing and energizing – naming the reality of injustice and proclaiming the promise of justice.

In prophetic communities, he says, “there is an available, expressed sense of pain that is owned and recited as a real social fact, that is visibly acknowledged in a public way, and that is understood as unbearable for the long term - AND - there is an active practice of hope, a community that knows about promises yet to be kept, promises that stand in judgement on the present.”

Prophetic imagination is not a flight of fancy, but rather engages deeply and critically with the realities of suffering and injustice in the world, while pointing to a radical vision of what is to come.

The real task of prophetic imagination -which, to be clear, is **our** task- is to look the fears and terrors in the face, to speak the anguish and passion, the “deathliness that gnaws at us” – to name this reality, and then to offer and engage with an imaginative promise of new life.

The job of the prophet, our job as a church, is publicly to speak the hopes and yearnings of the people, in subversion of all the very real factors that would deny such hope.

In this way, Prophetic Imagination is the dual practice of lament and amazement, grief and praise. It says, you know, *I* may never reach that place we have dreamed of together. But be assured that truth is marching on. Know that righteousness is marching on. “Mine eyes have seen the GLORY of the coming of the Lord.”

That last line from Dr. King is from the Battle Hymn of the Republic, a beloved American anthem written during the civil war by our own Unitarian foremother Julia Ward Howe.

What I find interesting is that King's use of that line to end his hopeful remarks points to the link between prophetic imagination and what is called eschatology. Eschatology is from the Greek *eschatos*, meaning last, and *logos*, meaning word. It is usually linked with the idea of the apocalypse, the end times.

And the song King riffs is full of apocalyptic hope.

"He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat.
He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment-seat."

The Glory of the Coming of the Lord is the Glory of his Kingdom, set down among us.

It is final judgement at last, and salvation.

The hope that truth and love and justice will go marching on inevitably is at its root an apocalyptic hope.

In the end, our hope says, all will finally be right and good.

And in many theological systems this apocalyptic hope is interpreted very literally and is expressed with lots of hellfire and destruction.

But that is not the only way. Eschatology, points out UU theologian Rebecca Parker, can be understood as the theological term for "speaking ultimate things."

The liberal theological interpretation of this act has more to do with expressing ultimate hope than predicting ultimate destruction. An end need not refer to a fiery demise so much as its less flowery definition of ultimate direction. What is our end? What is our purpose? Where are we headed?

And this is where eschatology links up with prophetic imagination. This is where we *proclaim* where we are headed – where we hold up the vision of our ultimate hopes and to declare what is possible.

The prophetic message of our tradition proclaims a promised land where all are treated as beloved and worthy and where all live into their inborn capacity for goodness and compassion.

And we, as a people, **will** reach the promised land, because it **has been promised**.

This is key in Brueggemann's writing - Prophetic imagination takes place in *covenantal* traditions. Hope is linked to promise. A vision of how things will be in the end is all about the fulfillment of promise.

The biblical traditions, for instance, are in covenantal relationship with God, entered into with trust in the eventual fulfillment of his promise. And so these traditions can have radical hope in the promised land, because God's promise *will be* fulfilled.

This is where things get both familiar and foreign in UU theology... because we consider ourselves a covenantal faith, but often in contemporary practice that covenant is seen as less than ultimate.

It becomes a sort of behavioral contract between individuals, and, as we have seen time and again, humans don't always keep their promises. We are limited and fallible - promise-making, promise-breaking, promise-renewing animals.

And with appropriate humility, we admit that we don't have the capacity to promise how things will inevitably end, or even what the unpredictable results of our own actions will be.

The promise we **do** have the capacity to make is a commitment to our ultimate hope.

What does it mean to live today in faithful covenant with that which we understand to be ultimate? What does it mean to enter into relationship with one another and the ultimate in a spirit of both trust and partnership?

We must consider these questions carefully.

Because once we have the prophetic message, we need the saving promise too.

By tradition our saving promise is a covenant with the source of love from which we come, and is mirrored in the covenants we make with one another. It has to do with a commitment to embodying the extravagant and universal love that is possible and palpable.

That is the promise that saves us.

Reinhold Niebuhr tells us in a beloved passage, included in our hymnal, that:

"Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore we are saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we are saved by faith. And nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love."

Our prophetic imagination, our belief in the possibility of true love embodied is sustained by the saving promise of hope beyond what our eyes can see, the saving promise of faith beyond what our hands can touch, the saving promise of final reconciliation in a love that is deeper and more expansive than even our wildest imagining.

Prophetic imagination and saving promise meet at a place of both giving and receiving.

We must live our side of the covenant. We must strive and imagine and work. And then we must receive. For as Brueggemann says “the radical faith of prophetic imagination is not an achievement; for if it were, we would will it and be done. Rather it is a gift.”

Rebecca Parker has called this responsive hope, acknowledging that hope is grounded in gratitude for the gift of life itself.

Recognizing the need to be grateful, we see before us the extravagant gift of life as good, as blessed. We see glimpses of ultimate things scattered everywhere.

This is the theological idea of Realized Eschatology, which tells us that the Kingdom of God is already being lived among us. It tells us that ultimate things do not lie in a linear way, straight ahead of us. The promise lives within us *and* ahead of us. The promise lives in fits and starts around us.

Even as we proclaim our vision of hope, we understand: Our eyes HAVE seen the glory. Hallelujah

Our eyes have seen the glory in the form of the men’s Baptist Network in Texas, which has been feeding and clothing and caring for Central American refugee children since before most of us even knew the story of their exodus. A glimpse of our promised land. Hallelujah.

Our eyes have seen the glory in the form of Israeli and Palestinian civilians outside Gaza gathering together in a circle of peace. A glimpse of our promised land. Hallelujah

The promised land is among us, and in between us already - Hallelujah – and it is ours to notice and enlarge every place where justice lives and love reigns.

“History says don’t hope on this side of the grave” Seamus Heaney tells us. “But then, once in a lifetime the longed for tidal wave of justice can rise up, and hope and history rhyme.” And that is a glimpse of the Glory. Hope and history rhyme. Hallelujah.

We sit on the mountain top this morning.
May pledge ourselves once more to that promise awaiting us just over Jordan and present among us already, in fits and starts.
May we recall our minds to ultimate things,
And so doing, may we see Glory within us, glory around us, glory ahead of us. Glory
Glory Hallelujah

