

Dreams and Devastation
Isaiah 40:1-5

First Presbyterian Church
December 6, 2020

In making his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, Martin Luther King Jr. drew upon the Isaiah passage we just heard read. The passage is about smoothing out those rough places in life, those times when our problems and our worries are way beyond our control.

Can anybody relate? I think we all can. COVID illnesses and deaths, 14-day quarantines, no hugging to warm our hearts, but plenty of masks and distance to isolate us from one another, even our family and loved ones over the holidays.

It’s unimaginable, the pain and suffering, particularly around the holidays. And yet, we’ve been through hard, devastating, unimaginable times before, and we can get through them again.

One way we get through devastating, unimaginable times is to look back at how we’ve gotten through such times in the past. And that’s what we’re going to do today, starting all the way back to the Babylonian captivity that sets the scene for today’s Bible passage.

Today’s Bible passage is all about helping us get through the roughest times imaginable. The Israelites were had been captured by the Babylonians and taken away to a foreign land. A huge desert wilderness stands between the City of Babylon where they are and the Temple of Jerusalem where they long to be, and God calls out for the creation of a highway to carry his people home. “A voice cries out,” saying, ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.’”

That is how we get through the roughest times imaginable. By turning to God to smooth things out. I’d love to know how God has helped to smooth out the rough patches in your life, particularly at Christmastime. Think about it.

There are so many Christmas traditions among our church families, yours included. So, I want you to think back right now to one of those family traditions of yours that you particularly to remember as getting your through a rough time, a particular rough time. This is our opportunity to share with one another over Zoom. I’m going to pause our screenshare while we do this. Raise your hand now if you’d like to share about, first what was happening and second how a particular Christmas tradition made a difference. Anybody?

Thank you. For me, that tradition is the Christmas card. Now, I'm not a great Christmas-card sender. Immediate family is about all I ever manage. And one year in particular, I was creating a handmade Christmas card for my first wife, Lynn, who – as most of you know – died tragically of cancer, at age 30. It was the Christmas before her passing, and I remember how we were struggling to keep it together in year two of our battle with leukemia. I made a card for Lynn that said, "We must never forget God's blessings." And that was not me, but God, God coming to me through the tradition of Christmas cards, to give us a sense of peace amid our fear and struggles.

To this day, no matter how rough a patch I'm going through, I can think back and that card helps smooth things out a bit. I'm going to share my screen again for the rest of our sermon time.

The point is, our faith is what smooths out the rough patches. Our faith is what gets us through the desert, back to the promised land. And with this pandemic, with this election season, with whatever it is you're facing right now, it is faith that will see you through, see us through.

And we tap into that faith – hold onto that faith – through our family traditions-and our church traditions-, traditions that remind us of who we are as God's beloved children, and who Jesus is as our faithful Lord and loving Savior, especially amid this world of ours.

Martin Luther King Jr., in his "I Have a Dream" speech, said, "We will not be satisfied until justice runs down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." This was 1963, when racial injustice was openly practiced and tolerated. There was little hope that the Civil Rights Movement could make a difference.

But King had a dream. And like most dreams, it lived on a hope and prayer, a whisp of a vision being knocked around by cold, hard reality. Kind of like our vision of what a post-COVID world will look like, our vision of what this country should be like, our vision of what our families will be like – including our church family – when this terrible virus is beaten back. Families back together at last.

Can any of us truly claim that vision apart from God. I don't think so. I don't think apart from God, Martin Luther King could claim his vision of what could. In fact, biographer Taylor Branch tells of the day King delivered that speech.

After declaring, "We will not be satisfied until justice runs down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream," Branch reports that King could not bring himself to deliver the next line of his speech. He just stopped.

Some of the people on the platform urged him on, and the gospel singer Mahālia Jackson called out as though she were in church, “Tell ’em about the dream, Martin.”

And that’s when his “Dream” took him to Isaiah. “... I have a dream,” said King, “that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.

I have a dream that one day ... the rough places will be made plains and the crooked places will be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together. This is our hope,” said King.

Today, as we add to our candle of hope the candle of peace, I invite you to dream what your And when it comes to getting from Babylonian despair to Jerusalem joy, remember God is the highway builder, who brings us an inner sense of joy, a joy that rises up on the flames of hope and shines brightly in the light of peace. Amen.