

Fixed on God's Promise

Isaiah 25: 1-9

1 John 2: 12-17

When things are in focus and we're attentive, we see clearly and know what's going on. Throw in some distractions that divert our attention, or move something out of focus, and we may think we know what's going on, but we've actually missed something, and possibly something rather critical.

The United States Women's Softball team won the gold medal in Atlanta's 1996 Olympic Games. They lost only one game. In the fifth inning against Australia, Danielle Tyler hit a home run over the center-field fence. The American third baseman floated around the bases elated. When she was greeted by a swarm of well-wishing teammates at home plate, she let the excitement distract her focus and she did not touch home plate. When all of the yelling subsided, the Australian team quietly appealed to the umpire who dramatically called Tyler out.

Rather than scoring a run, Tyler's blast over the fence netted her team an out. As it ended up, had the lady slugger stepped on home plate, her team would have won 1-0. Instead, after seven innings of regulation play the game was tied at 0-0. In extra innings, Australia emerged with a 2-1 win and the U.S. team took their only loss of the Olympics.

I remember completing a big grant application when I was director of YouthReach. Florida Department of Juvenile Justice grant applications were typically about 50 pages long. Our longtime administrative assistant had gone to another job and her replacement was inexperienced. I was assembling all of the pages and making 10 hard copies to send in a box to the state per their requirements. (That we're in the digital age has not yet been discovered by the State of Florida.)

As I was copying, I noticed a blank spot on the cover sheet that I had missed somehow. I pulled out the original, filled in the info, printed out a fresh copy and copied 10 new ones to exchange in each of the copies. I hustled the box to the UPS store and shipped it off, confident I had covered everything.

I would soon find out that the cover sheet that I replaced was also the signature page. In doing the switch, I had failed to sign the cover sheet again. There was no signed cover sheet in all the copies I had sent. No signature is considered by the state to be a "fatal flaw." It didn't matter what was on the 50 odd pages of the grant application, or that we had had several grants including the current one previously. There was no call to our agency to get a faxed copy of the cover sheet signed. All of the copies were trashed and consideration was ruled out due to the missing signature. That cost us the grant of over \$60,000 which there was no way for us to replace. In my rush to fix something that may have been non-essential, I ended up creating a "fatal flaw."

The recession was just starting – it was 2007, and in the end, that grant money would completely disappear within 2 years anyway. And it hasn't been replaced. Still, it remains a solid (and memorable) example of distraction causing failure.

The description of ruination provided by First Isaiah in the reading of chapter 24 is exhaustively depressing. Then chapter 25 begins with praise and doxology: *O Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you, I will praise your name; for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure.* It sounds like all is just fine.

But we know it isn't. First Isaiah writes after the devastation of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrian Empire. As the Assyrians were displaced by the Babylonian Empire less than 100 years later, the Babylonians then directly threatened the southern kingdom of Judah. We expect dark and dire warnings from Isaiah.

Then the tone becomes odd and confusing. Following this opening praise, we hear: *For you [O God] have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin; the palace of aliens is a city no more, it will never be rebuilt. Therefore strong peoples will glorify you; cities of ruthless nations will fear you.* Head scratch. We have no idea what's up.

The confusion continues as we hear the next piece out of place and unexpected: *For you [O God] have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat.* This passage only muddies the water further.

We've gone from praise, to **sinful** people who are **happy** that the city is **destroyed**, to God's care for the poor. Before we give up, let's go one passage further. *On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death for ever.*

What's described sounds like the messianic feast and the fulfillment of God's promised kingdom that will come at the end of the age – destroying the shroud and swallowing up death forever. It is stated succinctly, like a familiar saying, and it concerns not simply God's people, but *all* people, *all* nations – a universal vision.

The problem is that this thinking doesn't really take hold in Jewish literature for another several hundred years. Indeed, scholars now believe that chapters 24-27 of Isaiah really date from about 300 BCE, or about 300 years after First Isaiah was written, long after all of Isaiah was complete. These chapters are a late addition to the original.

Stepping back from the belief that this was written within the 600 BCE context of First Isaiah, we're free to discern the agenda of 300 BCE. Now when we go back and read this, we realize that the city is unnamed, the aliens are unnamed, the ruthless are unnamed, and the "strong people" are unnamed. These are generic terms depicting elements of this vision, familiar features of the coming of God's kingdom.

Cutting the exegesis down and getting to the point, the city has been a place of "haves," the people who are strong and ruthless and foreign and have it all (and I mean *all*), and the "have-nots," the poor and the needy. The strong and ruthless have run

amok. The greedy “haves” have consumed everything, drained and squandered the wealth, and left the city in ruins by their profligacy. It’s like the Wall Street bankers who, left to their own devices, will destroy the very system that provides them with wealth. Or the energy companies who crave profits and are readily willing to let the planet self-destruct in global warming in order to keep those profits. The strong and ruthless blew through everything. Meanwhile, the poor and needy survived since they’ve had the shelter and refuge of God who favors the poor and needy over the strong and ruthless.

Now that the strong and ruthless have devastated their own existence, they see that the poor and needy are doing okay while they suffer amid their desperation. The strong and ruthless come to honor and praise God who is trustworthy, faithful, and life-giving. Until reduced to destitution by their craven greed, they were unable to behold God, grasp any kind of faith, or act in a manner that was responsible, ethical, or worthy.

Having hit rock bottom as such, the strong and ruthless fulfill the age of sinful corruption, bringing it to its conclusion of self-destruction. This invites the coming of God’s new age with the messianic feast, the unifying of peoples throughout creation, and salvation to life eternal. It also proves that it’s amazing what you can see when the distractions get peeled back and a new vista comes into view. Sadly, there are some who need to hit rock bottom before they’re able to open their eyes, or have them opened.

Turning to the First Letter of John the disciple/apostle to the churches, we find more odd writing. Preceding our passage, John had written about the one who hates living in darkness whereas the one who loves lives in the light. Our passage has a series of *I write to you, dear children/fathers/young men, because ...* clauses. This is John’s way of emphasizing the familial nature of believers together, of the church. The blessings of the new age of Christ have been embraced by them in their faithfulness, in their focus on their God and the Lord who brings a new way. The end of the *because* clauses invariably fixes on some aspect of their appreciation and attentiveness to God and Christ and the Lord’s good news gospel.

The passage closes with a warning about loving the world and its often compelling distractions. Connecting with the strong and ruthless in Isaiah’s vision, John writes: *The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world—the cravings of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world. And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever.*

As we start a new year, we can know at the outset that the things and ways of the world will do their uppermost to get our attention, to get us to fix our sight on what the world wants us to desire and consume, from things to ideas to feelings to paths. The world wants to inform us about what is right, define what is just, set parameters for what shall be forgiven, and on and on.

But the world does not offer us justice, righteousness, peace, salvation, or new life. The world is desperately small, and wants us to shrink our vistas and visions to remain confined by its narrow dimensions.

Fixed on God, we are given an eternal canvas to draw the picture of beauty, truth, and goodness. Fixed on God, the pathway to life ever renewing and growing is always open and the invitation extended to those who are led by faithfulness in new directions.

May your new year gain some form of structure and discipline that encourages your attentiveness to God, to have the Kingdom fixed in your mind as priority over the world's aims to distract you. May your new year prosper you with joy and blessing.