

First Friends Church, a Quaker meeting
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett
April 4, 2021 Easter Sunday
Abundant Chances
Isaiah 25:1-9

Reading

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. For you 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. For you 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. When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm, the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place, you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds; the song of the ruthless was stilled. On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged 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 forever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Message

This is my seventh chance to bring an Easter message. It's a risk because you see- seven is a significant number in the Bible as well as for the ancient Persians, Indians, Greek and Romans. Among other things seven symbolizes completion.¹ Does that mean I have to have figured it out and have it be complete? That's a lot of pressure!

I chose to reread my previous Easter messages, even though a friend who reread his old sermons said they were useless because his theology had changed drastically! What I found is my message about God and Easter is still the same. In fact, I suspect it's the same on all the other Sundays. I hope that is a good thing.

¹ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/christiancrier/2014/09/26/what-does-the-number-seven-7-mean-or-represent-in-the-bible/#:~:text=The%20number%20seven%20in%20the%20Bible%20represents%20divine,that%20represents%20mankind%20and%20also%20represents%20created%20things.> <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/seven/>

God loves and wants relationship with us. That was Jesus' message in his ministry, life, death and resurrection; we are called to live in Light, Spirit and Truth. When we do it together we experience the Beloved Community, kingdom, or heaven on earth that Jesus said was already and not yet, nearby, among, and within us.

Even so, I'm absolutely sure my message about Easter, God and the rest is not complete. Why? Because I am still here, you are still here and there are abundant chances to explore and live this ahead of us. A writer admonished, "Do not exit this time in the same spiritual way that you entered it."² Now we can apply this to Easter Sunday, Holy Week, the pandemic isolation, or broadly to life. "Do not exit this time in the same spiritual way that you entered it." We can choose to stay the same, but God gives us chances to choose transformation.

The Hebrew Scriptures tell us the story of a people who faced many disasters and caused a few for themselves and others. In Isaiah's time they experienced violence, destruction, and exile in Babylon, and challenges to their culture, religion, families and individual lives. The text from Isaiah seems to begin rejoicing that God "...made the city a heap... [that] will never be rebuilt... and ... strong peoples will glorify you; cities of ruthless nations will fear you." The oppressors are vanquished and will be afraid, the strong who follow God will rejoice. But he also notes God is a refuge for the poor and needy from the weather

² Washington National Cathedral, quote from essay by Darrell Green.

and the ruthless. Like other prophets Isaiah's image of God is rescuing the downtrodden, privileging the poor, and modeling care for the marginalized. Even when comforting and encouraging the people, Isaiah sets before them an example of what God expects them to do through what God does.

Finally, Isaiah prophesies God will make a feast and destroy the (death) shroud over all peoples and all nations. It is a universal message of all people and nations being brought into relationship. And here the text connects with Easter: God will swallow up death forever, wipe away tears from all faces, take away disgrace from all the earth, and save us. God has come! Be glad and rejoice in salvation. They had abundant chances throughout history and are given another.

Isaiah spoke about all that went wrong in the life of the Israelites but also all the places God did and would transform disaster into a time of salvation and rejoicing. But they had a responsibility to show up and participate. God gave chances and they made choices. God provides multiple chances throughout the journey of the Bible and the journey of the cosmos.

In co-creation God provides the chances, we make the choices. Waking up each morning is a chance- so if we live to be 100 we have 36,500 chances! That made me think about how chances and choices are similar and different. Chances include unpredictability and risk but can also include fortuitous possibilities. Choices imply power and agency and allow options and alternatives. Both are part

of being human; they provide openings into becoming more than what we are in this moment.

Chances and choices can make us feel powerful or intimidate us! When we assume that what we do will change everything, and then nothing will ever be the same, are we right? Or are we assuming a level of power well beyond what we actually have? Is there not another chance that will come even after we make our choices? If you tell me it doesn't happen I can tell you of relationships or previous situations and projects I repeated. It is called transference in psychology. When someone or something becomes a stand in for the issues you did not resolve before.

I have found there is no guarantee of when or how frequent; but chances offered by God to make choices are often repeated. They bring new possibilities for wholeness when my choices are love and compassion. When I choose poorly I also learn and grow, if it is a little painful. It likely also holds true in relationships, a job or even a project. If you don't clean your tools and put them away correctly (a choice) then they get damaged or lost, reducing the chance for the next project. But the project can still happen even if we have to get new tools. Or how about finding your car keys? The choice to put them in the same place is ours. The chance of not finding them goes up when we don't. But do we think they just reappear when we have looked for them over and over, or do we find them in places we have left and lost them before? Though it might not look the same the

second time, we are offered chances to do things again; to make the same or different choices.

Out of the pandemic we lost 550,000 people. We mourn every single one of them. Out of pandemic we lost health for many people and our economy, and a year of school, retirement, work and fun. Out of pandemic we will rise because God's resurrection love always rises. It is incumbent upon us to take the chance to make good choices out of this. "The dead cannot cry out for justice, it is the duty of living to do it for them."³ This quote has both literal and figurative meanings for us. As individuals we are asked how we will take the chance to make choices to participate in love and justice. As a meeting going through enormous changes, God is opening up new possibilities: chances to make choices about how we worship and minister within and beyond our doorstep to witness to God's beloved community that exists here for others to be served and join in.

Each day, each event, each moment is a new beginning, God offers abundant chances. The crucifixion, the pandemic, death of hope in a job, a child's illness, the end of a marriage, the impending end of pandemic isolation... no moment is lost; they are God's openings to resurrection, new life and abundant possibilities. God's chances for our new life choices.

³ Lois McMaster Bujold

I end with a mash up of previous blessings- “Rejoice in the Source of Overflowing Goodness, Love, Light and Life. Be gentle with everyone, creation and even yourself. Be transformed. Make living the Way and sharing the message paramount.”

“Humans can be limited creatures with baser natures, but we can also be like the Creator, loving, caring, kind and creative. We have learned many times in history that “If we can imagine it we can do it.” We are the ones who choose to limit the interpretation of what is sacred. God does not... We can also make it as God has called it- good.”

“Carrying the divine spark within is a lofty, awesome, terrifying responsibility yet we are made in the image and carry the Light. The good thing is we are not expected to know how to do it; not every day in every moment without mistakes and without growing into it our whole lives. We can forgive ourselves; we can forgive others for not being perfect.”

“Peace; that in hope creates anew, possibilities for the future, unbounded by the limits of the world, even in the seemingly impossible moments of this time and place ...It is what God offers the world through us.” “Soar where Christ has led. Be empowered to say something and bring good news.”

“God’s Love began this adventure. God’s Love sustains it. We may experience grief and challenge, but love carries us forward in hope, moving us to take action in Love. Love always rises.”

Not exactly greatest hits- and certainly not complete. But “God is not done with me (or us) yet, far from it.” I am glad there are still abundant chances to come!