

Promise, Patience, Prescription

Again this season, we will be treated to the classic film *It's a Wonderful Life*, the story of George Bailey whose honesty and goodwill are tested by misfortune. The hardship he experiences leads him to the brink of despair. But in the “spirit of Christmas,” he is rescued with the help of a caring community and an angel struggling to earn his wings. The original Jimmy Stewart movie will be shown on dozens of TV and streaming channels over the next couple of weeks. Current TV sit-coms and dramas will strike a similar theme in their regular showings. Down on their luck, characters of every ilk will find that the season offers hope with what often seems like easy solutions.

A less saccharin but decidedly more challenging story, beautifully unfolds in today’s powerful Scriptures and is exactly what we need today: both the promise and the prescription for a hurting and troubled world yearning for healing and transformation. The prophet Isaiah offers hope to those who are overcome with hardships, alienation, and fear of the future. Recognizing that those struggles are real and often overwhelming, he uses the powerful imagery from nature.

*The desert and the parched land will exult
the steppe will rejoice and bloom.
They will bloom with abundant flowers,
and rejoice with joyful song.*

He challenges the people not to fear. The one who will rescue them is none other than their God, who, as the Psalm proclaims, is forever faithful.

In our own lives, hardships can easily overwhelm us. Financial problems, health issues, conflicted relationships can create a sense of abandonment. Natural disasters and political strife exacerbate hunger and poverty across the globe. It seems as if another crisis erupts before we can adjust to the last one. In the midst of all these struggles, people of faith look to the ever Faithful One to fulfill the promise revealed in these Advent Scriptures.

That promise revealed by Isaiah and the Psalmist is tempered by the Apostle James with an appeal for patience. He tells us that, like the farmer, we must do our part and then patiently wait for our efforts to bear fruit. God's fidelity is not something we can demand. It is a gift, and not unlike the eager child at this time of year, we must wait, excited by the thought of the promise, yet patient in our expectation.

The Evangelist Matthew offers yet another challenge to our patient waiting. Like John the Baptist in prison, we may be called on to make a sacrifice to insure the fulfillment of the promise. Even the Christ was willing to offer himself for the sake of the promise. We should likewise be willing to make ourselves available for those whose hardships are beyond their capacity to cope. The fact that we bear the name of the Christ means that we are willing to be his presence in the world. It's not a matter of "earning our wings." We're the ones called to bring about the promise in our time.

The Advent Season so easily bumps into the secular world's holiday festivities. Though they are not mutually exclusive, the latter often distorts the meaning of the former. We are not looking for easy solutions to the crises that surround us. Clarence the Angel cannot resolve the issues plaguing our Church, nor can a Santa Claus be up to the task of calming the social and political storms that rage around us. Those issues are far too complex for easy solutions.

The promise demands a prescription that is modeled after the one who sacrificed all for the sake of the other, and Advent points the way.

If we were simply to take the popular idea of the Giving Tree and made it a year-long commitment, we would move beyond the heartwarming gestures of one season into the radical transformation announced in today's Scriptures. As critical as the annual appeal for the retirement of religious is, couldn't we find more ways to show appreciation for their lives of dedicated service throughout the year?

Because we are called to act in just this way, we can gather around the altar today to rejoice that the promise is real and the prescription for its fulfillment rests with each one of us. The Eucharist will empower us to respond to the Word proclaimed today. We boldly announce it with prophet and psalmist, and actively promote it with the Baptist and the Christ. Through the chaos that surrounds us, the message of Advent echoes: "*Forever faithful, the promise will have its day.*" This is reason for rejoicing.