

THE FUTURE BELONGS TO US

“The Sun will come out tomorrow; bet your bottom dollar that tomorrow there’ll be sun...Tomorrow, tomorrow, I love ya’ tomorrow, you’re only a day away.”

Many of you will recognize these lyrics from the musical “Annie.” The words are sung by Annie, a little girl who clings to the hope that the parents who left her at the orphanage when she was a baby will someday return for her.

The other girls in the orphanage tell Annie she is a fool to believe they will come back. She admits that she can’t make sense out of her parent’s long delay in coming for her. But she continues to believe nonetheless. For her, only the promise of the future makes the present tolerable.

In a sense, the Earth is an orphanage and we are all orphans within it. That is why so many people choke up a little when they hear the words of the song. They realize that if, indeed, there is no tomorrow, life has barely been worth living.

But it seems to me that Annie’s plight is especially the plight of the people of God.

Called the “little flock” or the “remnant,” they, are the *ultimate* orphans in the world. Regarded as weak and inconsequential in the world’s affairs, often persecuted by their apparently stronger enemies, they cling to the hope of tomorrow in a particular sense. For *their* heavenly parent has told them that He’s coming back for them. And in spite of the long delay, in spite of the fact God’s absence elicits ridicule from the unbelievers, in spite of the fact they are told they are fools to believe such sentimental nonsense, these orphans of God believe nonetheless. Like Annie, it is the promise of the future that makes their present tolerable.

However, *unlike* Annie, something has happened to God’s orphans that reassures them about the future. And that is that person of Jesus of Nazareth. Through Jesus, God Himself invaded human history, serving notice that the marvelous things Jesus would do were only a sample of what God would for the whole world at the end of history. You see this in the gospels in so many ways.

For example, in Mark’s gospel Jesus’ exorcism of demons is one of the most characteristic activities of his ministry. Even when Jesus sends out the seventy as his ambassadors, they return amazed that even the demons are cast out. They sense that Christ’s struggle with the demons indicates that in a special sense, Satan is engaged in a cosmic struggle with God over God’s reign in the world. This struggle during the ministry of Jesus is like a preview of the final war between good and evil so often depicted in both the Old and the New Testaments. For a long time, of course, Israel saw this conflict in terms of military and political supremacy. Jesus reinterpreted their hope in terms of a spiritual rather than a military event. “The coming of the Kingdom...will mean nothing less than the destruction of the Devil and his angels in eternal fire (Matt. 25:41) at the...[coming] of the Son of Man.”

This means that the chief opponents of God’s kingdom are spiritual, and the victory of the kingdom of God is first of all a spiritual victory. We are in the grip of spiritual powers we cannot conquer. God alone can liberate us. But, to free us, God must *destroy* the *principle* of evil in the universe. When Jesus casts out the demons he is illustrating God’s victory over evil in a preliminary—but still decisive—way.

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Our world is an orphanage in which death and anguish and an absence of forgiving love often make our daily existence a bleak one. But, in that orphanage God has his “Annies” who believe in Jesus and in whose hearts is a song about tomorrow. The good news of the gospel is that God will be visiting His people.

“Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him” (Isa. 40:9-10). A herald would appear upon the mountains publishing peace, announcing good tidings of salvation, saying to Zion, “Your God reigns...The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God” (Isa. 52:7, 10).

This promised day will be announced by one anointed by the Spirit of the Lord “to bring good tidings to the afflicted, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn” (Isa. 61:1-2).

In the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus claimed that this gospel was no longer *hope* but *event* (Luke 4:18). In Him, the time of fulfillment had come. God’s word was being uttered in a dramatic way. The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor are given hope. Because Jesus was the Word, His words are powerful. He only has to *speak* and the demons flee, something far beyond any exorcisms witnessed by the Jews. His words are eternally true; they will decide the final destiny of humans in the judgment. He has the authority to reinterpret the true meaning of the law and therefore, shows no embarrassment when uttering “Moses said unto you *but I say something else to you.*”

In Jesus something unparalleled and dramatic occurred. The disciples knew it and so did the Jewish leadership that tried to understand Him and His mission.

However, even with the remarkable events of the last 2,000 years, since the time of Jesus God has been largely silent. Those of you who were here last week will remember that I told you that God’s silence in the face of the attacks upon Him means that we, His orphans, must defend Him. Up to this point in history, God has failed to provide for His own defense. He has adequately explained to no one why He has waited so long to bring that Kingdom fully into being. Jesus convinced us that we could depend on God to keep His word to us.

And so, like Annie, we cling frantically and tenaciously to tomorrow. Let the world ridicule us, let them say we are fools chasing after rainbows, dreamers clinging to mists. They, like us, are orphans. But we are the orphans who believe, the “remnant,” the “little flock.” We live by faith that God will bring His power into play to achieve His purposes. Because this is so, we must use the future to interpret the past and the present. This means that if God exists, he has a nature (as the theologians say) that is dominated by the future “mode.” In other words, God ultimately depends on what He will and can do rather than on what He has done.

How, then, are we to live while we wait for the future? The answer is that we are to live with passion. Our God is a God of mystery and amazement. And it is our passion that will keep us from getting discouraged. Israel kept its passion alive in the hearts of its children by telling them the stories of the people. *These are the stories* the elders would say, these are what make us a people. “These are not

negotiable. They must be embraced to be who we are.”

God’s orphans of today are no different. We, too, must relate to God and the future with passion. But we have other stories besides those of Israel. We have the stories of Jesus.

Passion was so important to Israel it was even *taught* to their children. That nurture in passion expressed itself in a number of ways:

1. The passion in Israel *equips people to cry*, to feel pain, to articulate the anguish, to sense the pathos and act on it. Israel’s life with God begins in a cry (Ex. 2:23-25). Their bondage drives them to literally scream at God for help. They are the orphans who feel the pain of the others who have no faith in the return of their parents, who face life, and death, alone.
2. This passion in Israel *empowers Israel to care*. Listen to Deut. 10:19:

Love the sojourner therefore; for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.

Nothing is more compelling in the memory of Israel than the conviction that God has identified with and intervened for those without social value, for those in the deepest suffering and despair—for the Hebrew slaves. An orphan being abused by more powerful orphans reaches deep into the heart of God. And any people who love God care about those who most desperately need God’s care.

3. This passion in Israel *permitted rage*. This rage was a theological challenge to God. Yahweh appears at times to be fickle, indifferent, even unfaithful to His original promise. To care about God and about people means that the continued pain of the world cause us to alternate between despair, hope and rage. And it seems to me that in recent years I have heard increasing Adventist rage about the delay of God’s victory. Such rage can, of course, be destructive. But in the Bible, it has its positive side as well.

“Israel practices and teaches its young that it must not be excessively submissive even at the throne of God, for excessive submissiveness to God is most probably allied with excessive conformity to the social powers of the day. This is not to say that Israel refused awe, wonder, reverence, even silence at the throne, but that this is held in tension with the boldness to critique God to God’s face.”

You find evidence for this attitude in the person of Moses who dares to remind God that He *must not* break His promise by blotting out His Hebrew children (see Ex. 32:32, 33:12-16, Num. 11:11-15). You find it also in Job who demands answers from God about His suffering.

4. This passion in Israel *authorizes Israel to hope*. God is not bound by what has happened. He is the God of newness, the God who will do something for His people that has never been done before, the God who makes and keeps His promises. He, with us, is “on the way to a new land, a new family, a new home, a new kingdom” (cf. Heb. 11:1).

Israel, God’s children, orphans in the world, looking for a city whose builder and maker is God. Perhaps

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no text in all the Bible is more suggestive of how orphaned we are than the haunting phrase..."A wandering Aramean was my father."

Even God's people today. It is all too obvious that the Earth is still our orphanage, one that becomes increasingly difficult to deal with as Christians. The pain of the world gushes at us like some severed artery. One cannot watch the evening news without getting depressed: AIDS, cancer, missing children, hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, assassinations, angry mobs protesting Apartheid, car bombings, star wars weaponry, child abuse, rape, violent crime.

"How long, O Lord, how long?" we cry? How long must we march, step by step, inexorably, into the grave. Some of us get sick and face death long before our time; but whenever it comes, we are not ready for it. We want our parents and grandparents to stay forever. We want our children to live in safety.

And Lord, how long must we defend you? We suffer doubly in this world. In our passion before You, we suffer over the pain of the world. But worse, we are almost tortured over your silence and hiddenness in the midst of it all. Lord, even the Jews have been unable to stand it. Like us, they believed they were God's orphans in the world and that before any holocaust would be permitted, God would rescue His people. But God, you did not lift one discernible finger to help anybody at Dachau and Auschwitz. That is why so many Jews no longer believe in You. They have lost faith in the future; they have turned their backs on tomorrow.

Will that happen to us? To your orphans of God called Seventh-day Adventists? Or Christians?

And that voice that spoke the world into being; that voice that thundered the principles of justice on Sinai, that voice that cast out the demons in Palestine, answers our plea gently:

"It can. But it need not. That is one reason for the existence of my church, my 'koinonia,' my 'fellowship.' As you relate to each other in the name of Jesus the Christ, teach each other to be passionate about God, whether it be the passion of crying, the passion of caring, the passion of rage or the passion of hope. *Expressing your passion keeps the future alive.* You will not forget who you are. You will remember the stories that make you my people; the stories not only of Adam and Noah and Abraham and Moses but the stories of Bethlehem and Cana, Golgotha and the garden tomb. But most of all the story of my Holy Spirit leading the early church and the beginnings of this movement."

Our daily experience tells us that all is lost, that the planet is going to be reduced to ashes in a nuclear conflagration. "Not so!" the voice shouts. "Lift up your heads! Your redemption draws night." Agnostics and theists may ridicule us for thinking that there is a heavenly parent, a God who cares. We are told that it is all wishful thinking, an illusion to comfort us in our pain, that all we have is the now and the visible.

"Not so!" shouts the voice again. "Today is real, but tomorrow's coming. And tomorrow is more real than yesterday or today! I am the God of the future, the God of the eschaton, the God who reveals Himself in all His glory only at the end, the God who fully heals all your brokenness...tomorrow."

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These past 10 years I have had the privilege of ministering to you about this great gospel truth. And, quite frankly, you have ministered in return to me. We have reminded each other, encouraged each other, prayed for each other, to hang on until tomorrow. The past is gone with all its travails and happiness. It is only a memory. We have the present only for a moment. But we have tomorrow for eternity. Therefore, let us not look back to the past. We must always look ahead to the future.

“Let not your hearts be troubled. Ye believe in God, believe in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; I go to prepare a place for you; And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also” (John 14:1-3).

The past may have belonged to the warmongers, to Attila the Hun and Genghis Khan, to the plunderers and greedy, to the inquisitors and self-righteous, but the *future belongs to us!*

The past may have belonged to heart disease, cancer, AIDS, polio, diphtheria, typhoid and the bubonic plague, but the future belongs to us!

Let us shout the good news: *the future belongs to us because we belong to god.* “My Father has given them into my hand and no one can snatch them from me.” “He that hath the Son hath life...” “And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the former things had passed away and there was no more sea...And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither crying any more. And God himself shall be with them and be their God.”

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