

Isaiah 25:6-9 Bill Uetricht All Saints' Day 11.3.24

It's no surprise to you that someone like me who speaks for a living treasures good preaching, inspiring speeches, soaring rhetoric, whether spoken or written. A cursory look at our nation's history will take you to soaring rhetoric.

How about what we experience in our nation's Declaration of Independence? "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

And then how about the soaring rhetoric of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address? "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

And then how about what I think is one of the best speeches of all time, Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech? "We have come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of Now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice."

You were expecting a different part of that speech, weren't you? You know, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." But the whole speech is full of soaring rhetoric. I wish I could write and speak like King did.

Soaring rhetoric plays an essential role, in my opinion. It often serves to take us to our best and to our highest. It generally, when used in a life-giving way, moves us beyond despair and locates us in

the land called hope. And to be human, to be Christian is to need and to be driven by hope.

It's all Saints Day. It's a day for soaring rhetoric, for written and spoken words that elevate us, that lead us into hope, even if sometimes the words, the thoughts seem a bit unrealistic, out of touch with the so-called "real world."

The prophet Isaiah gives us soaring rhetoric today, unrealistic imagery. The words are spoken to a community that knows the defeat of battle and now has experienced the joy of victory. To this nation comes these words: "On this mountain (the mount of Zion in the holy city of Jerusalem) 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."

If your nation has been the victim of an oppressor, as Israel had been, you realize that one of the struggles you often face is the lack of food, good food. The people in Gaza now know this. Not only are they being bombed, but many of them also lack food, the basic necessities. The vision from Isaiah is that those who have been oppressed now are sitting at a banquet table often reserved for the rich. They are eating the good stuff.

The rhetoric continues: "And God 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."

Oh my gosh, the rhetoric is higher than high, beyond comprehension. Those who knew the devastation of battle, the many lives that were sacrificed in war, are now told that death, something known by all peoples and all nations, is a thing of the past. It no longer has power. The mourning that it causes is done away with. No more crying there. No more dying there. No more

disgrace that sickness, death, and failure cause. The Lord has spoken, and life is fully transformed.

I feel lifted. I feel empowered. Death isn't final. It doesn't speak the last word. I sense an increasing amount of courage coming to my soul.

The soaring rhetoric today doesn't stop with the poetry of Isaiah. It continues in the poetry of Revelation: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and earth has passed away, and the sea was no more."

Oh, it's not that the first creation was bad, that somehow we need to escape this place. No, it's that this place hasn't reached its fulfillment. There is too much wrong, too much oppression, too much death. The new earth is a renewed earth, the earth as it ought to be. The sea is no more, which is a way of saying that chaos is no more and that Roman oppression, which was driven by their control of the waterways, is no more.

"And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them. And they will be God's peoples.'"

Isn't it interesting that many Christians, when they think about the future, they conjure up ideas about our escaping this life. They call it "the rapture," a word that doesn't really show up in the Bible. The view is that we who are the specially chosen or have raised our hands at a crusade get the heck out of here. We get to fly up to heaven where we will be beyond all the ruckus, all the chaos down on earth. But that is not the vision of the book of Revelation. The vision of this book is that the final future is a matter of God making

the earth his home. The future is not an escape plan. No, it is a matter of God tenting among us, moving into our campground.

Oh, this is soaring rhetoric that takes our eyes off of heaven and causes us to focus on earth, a transformed earth, where again, death is no more and mourning and crying and pain are no more. Life and the earth have become what they ought to be and were created to be.

And again, I am empowered. I am energized. The rhetoric has raised me above where the facts on the ground have taken me. Death, while real and powerful, is not controlling life. Bigger than death is a God who has the ability to recreate, whose primary job is life, not death.

Jesus makes that clear in today's gospel reading. He has been beckoned to respond to the needs of his friends Mary and Martha who have lost to death their brother Lazarus. He meets them outside of town and eventually arrives at Lazarus' grave. In this visit Jesus doesn't skim over the reality of death. He feels it. He gets mad, and he begins to weep. But the stench of death doesn't stop him. He goes over to the tomb and with a loud voice cries out: "Lazarus, come out!" And the dead man came out, for you see, in God, what rules is not death, but resurrection. "Unbind him," Jesus tells his friends, "And let him go." In Jesus, there is freedom from the power of death.

Oh, think what that means. Think about how much control death has over our lives. Think about the anger that it produces, the bitterness that it creates, the hopelessness that it engenders, the despair that it causes, the crabbiness that it leads to. The lives of many people are run by death. But today death has been met head on by something bigger than itself. Today in the midst of death has appeared life, life that invites you to come on out of your tombs,

sometimes your self-imposed tombs, life that unbinds your clothes of death and sets you free.

Now I don't say that with any flippancy, with a sense that dealing with death is easy. We all know better. It's the hardest thing we do. Grief is very real. Its pain sometimes can last a lifetime. But the Christian message experienced in the resuscitation of Lazarus and most fully in the resurrection of Jesus is that in the end life wins.

The soaring rhetoric of the scriptures is intended to call us to trust that, even when at times it feels nearly impossible to do so. The soaring rhetoric of the scriptures is meant to give us hope and not for just after we die, although we are called to trust it for that as well. No, Isaiah and Revelation imagine a whole new future, so that we might live differently *now*, so that we might have a very different *imagination* of what is possible *now*.

We who trust the soaring rhetoric of hope will live hopefully now, will make sure that the poor are fed, that housing is provided for all who need it, that strangers are welcomed, that war is brought to an end, that gun violence is reduced, that this fragile earth is cared for, that sinners are forgiven, that enemies are loved, that the left out are let in, that death is not allowed to speak the final word.

The soaring rhetoric of Isaiah and Revelation is meant, to quote King, to remind ourselves of "the fierce urgency of Now." Now is the time for us to imagine hope and to live it.