

There's an old phrase that *sounds* like it's from the Bible: "God helps those who help themselves." It's an idea that goes back to ancient Greece, but the phrase as *we* know it comes from England, and it's actually only about as old as First Parish Church. Eventually Ben Franklin put it in "Poor Richard's Almanac," and ever since people have been quoting it as part of the Bible—which it's not. It also doesn't leave a lot of room for grace, or mercy. What about people who *can't* help themselves? Jesus himself exemplified God reaching out to help the helpless and the hopeless.

But while "God helps those who help themselves" isn't *entirely* true, neither is its opposite. "The Lord will provide" *is* a Biblical phrase, but we know from experience that God's help isn't usually "magic." There is room for miracles in this world, and we see them in our own lives, but more often than not God answers our prayers in ways we wouldn't expect, right?

Maybe the truth can be found somewhere in between.

I'd like to give you a little context to the part of the book of Isaiah we're in today. The short version is, Isaiah is split into three separate parts, each written at different times spanning many years. What scholars sort of informally call Second Isaiah, was recorded at the end of the Babylonian exile.

This exile had lasted a couple of generations, during which the people of Israel were deported from their homeland and forced to live in foreign countries while their conquerors tore their holy city of Jerusalem apart. Now when *new* conquerors swooped in and defeated the *old* conquerors, they told the people of Israel they were finally allowed to go home. By that time, very few of the Israelites had ever set foot in their homeland—most had been born *after* the exile began. Second Isaiah was the prophet's call for the children of Israel to seize the moment, return to the land God had promised to them, and find their destiny there.

The so-called "*Third* Isaiah," which is where today's Scripture reading comes from, addressed the people of Israel *after* they had finally returned home. They came back to a land ravaged by war, conquest, and profiteering, their holy places reduced to rubble and only echoes remaining to testify to the former glory their fathers and mothers had told them of.

The people of Israel came back to a land that didn't look the way they wanted it to, and they did their best to build it back up. They built their lives from the ground up: houses, schools, agriculture—they built a new temple in Jerusalem, but they couldn't even tell if they were building it in the right place, let alone the right shape or size.

In our reading today from Isaiah, God is speaking to these people who are striving for a better world and just can't see it in the world around them. In Isaiah 65 we hear a promise that God is about to create a new heaven and a new earth, leaving the imperfections that came before in the dust of memory. God promises a city of joy, full of happy citizens free of suffering and pain. And God isn't just talking about some perfect municipality where all the trains run on time and every house has fiberglass insulation. God is talking about a utopia, a world where people get to live the lives they were meant for and no less—a world where no one's life is cut short by a bullet in their school or a cancer in their organs. Where peace reigns and God's love pours from every heart.

“The Kingdom of God.” That's the name Jesus had for it. It was a central part of his message to all of us. Something we were pointing towards, or, something He tried to *get* us pointed towards. A promised land to come that God wants for us, whether we deserve it or not.

In the Kingdom of God, what you create, what you make, what you strive for isn't stolen from you, or used to line someone else's pockets. In the Kingdom of God children aren't born under a doomsday clock, and the efforts of people like you and me aren't for nothing. There is no longer predator and prey, there is understanding and reconciliation and community. Siblings don't draw the blood of siblings, and our *stupid* human wars are *done*.

In the Kingdom of God we love our neighbors. We share meals with Samaritans and tax collectors and Pharisees and sinners. Sounds like what some of us have to look forward to when our family gets together for Thanksgiving.

Two thousand years after Jesus, and a few hundred more after Isaiah... still we find ourselves asking the same questions as the people struggling in ancient Jerusalem. When will we get from *this*, this world we're in *now*, that we

see around us every day, and hear about whenever we turn on the news... when will we get from *this*... to the Kingdom of God? *How?*

Well God says God will create it. And I truly believe that. If God wanted it to it could happen *tomorrow*, just like that.

But the fact that God *isn't* just snapping celestial fingers and magicking us a new heaven and a new earth isn't cause for *despair*, or a sign that a loving God doesn't exist. To me it's a sign that God *is* working to fulfill God's promise from Isaiah 65, but not as a flashy *parlor* trick... as something *more*. Something more *real*.

The idea of one day the clouds parting and gold light shining down and everything changing in a blink of an eye with Hollywood-budget special effects and a moving soundtrack has always felt like a *cheat* to me.

Like, we can just keep on doing our thing—letting this world kinda chug along on its tracks—without a care for the future because we know that one day God will hit the cosmic reset button and fix everything we've messed up. And all of a sudden everything will be perfect.

And not only that, *we* will be perfect!

Because the assumption in that is, once God creates a new heaven and a new earth, and the lion is lying down with the lamb and all who are hungry are fed... that we won't screw it up all over again!

We just *assume* that once God drops this perfect kingdom down on our heads that we're gonna be perfect too. Like flipping a lightswitch, we go from confused and uncertain and afraid and selfish and angry and disgusting, to all of a sudden perfect citizens of the kingdom of God.

And I don't think it works that way.

Even Christianity doesn't work that way. When we drop down on our knees and pray to God, asking God to forgive our sins and letting Christ into our hearts as our savior, that we may dwell in the house of the Lord forever, does anyone really think we wake up the next day and don't mess it up all over again? That's the Christian relationship: stumbling, making mistakes, falling short, choosing wrongly, and then going back to God and asking God to help us do better next time.

And each time we do better, and each time we aren't perfect, and each time we go back to God, who dusts us off and sends us back into the world with a pat on the head and a... "go get 'em, kid."

If that's who we are when we have a Savior who wipes clean the sin of our souls, then why should we expect we would be any different if that same Savior snapped His fingers and dropped utopia on our heads?

I think the Good News of the kingdom of God to come isn't *just* that it *will* come one day... but that one day we will be *worthy* of it!

And how do we become worthy of it? By helping God *build* it.

By helping God build it.

That's the magic trick. The trick nobody saw coming. The Israelites thought God would have a utopia waiting for them when they returned from Exile. And then they thought that eventually, when God was ready, God would wave a celestial hand and the city would be rebuilt in unending glory. "Well, in the meantime, we've gotta have a roof over our heads." And so they put a few houses back together to have somewhere to sleep. And still God hadn't built a new heaven and a new earth, so they cobbled together a temple to hold them over until God put a better one in. But still God hadn't built a new heaven and a new earth, so they started to put together water systems, and agriculture, and laws, and holidays, and before they knew it they had a city again.

It wasn't the new heaven and the new earth that Isaiah promised... but it was a step in the right direction. And I think with every generation that passes we take more and more steps in that direction. And I think the real magic trick that God is playing is working *through* us. Working *with* us.

It really encapsulates the idea of stewardship we've been exploring this month. We don't just wait for God to help the poor and fix all the problems of our community and our world. We do it *with* God. Right alongside. We work alongside Jesus to build the Kingdom God has promised will come: a Kingdom where the wolf and the lamb feed together, and the lion eats straw like the ox. A Kingdom with no place for serpents.

We each are called by God to join that transformative work in different ways. Some of us are called to give money to charities, or to pledge to the church. Some of us are called to volunteer our time and energy, and do good in

the lives of others through our labor and skills. Some of us are called to advocate or legislate or vote, to ensure that the systems of our community and our nation *do* justice and let righteousness flow. Some of us are called to teach, or to protect, or to offer a shoulder to cry on. Some of us are called to help out at the food pantry for a couple hours a week. Every one of us has ways we can put one block on top of the other to help build the city of God.

And that's what this stewardship season is about. It's about taking the time to discover the ways that God is calling you to join Jesus in the greatest construction project of all time.

There's a lot of suffering in this world, and so, so much injustice. Homes and peoples ravaged by war. Vulnerable lambs preyed upon by lions with Swiss bank accounts. People who are different treated like scum by society and taught to hate themselves. Even in our town there are people struggling just to survive; whether it's the jobless, the homeless, the addicted... or people whose struggle to survive is on the *inside*, where we can't see it. People, young and old, trying to decide whether the pain and the hatred and the alienation of this world is worth *living* for, or if it would just be easier...

That's what the kingdom of God is for. That's why we need a new heaven and a new earth. A city to come home to after our time of exile in hostile lands.

But God's *not* a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat. God's more like the foreman at a construction site, blueprints rolled out on a folding table, gathering the workers around. God's handing out hard-hats and walkie-talkies.

God's telling us where it's okay to walk and reminding us of the OSHA safety regs. God's helping us carry those long heavy I-beams, and God's letting us know when it's time for a lunch break. God's keeping track of our overtime slips and advocating for us at union events. And when we can't get the backhoe out of the rut it's stuck in, God's jumping in and showing us how a *real* pro does it.

And if we put in our time, and really commit to this construction project, the new world God has promised us will be complete one day, before

we even know it. And we'll be able to look back, or maybe our children will, or our children's children... and realize that Isaiah's dream has been fulfilled, thanks be to God. *See* the wolf and the lamb feeding together, see the lion eating straw like the ox... see peace and love and satisfaction reign *everywhere*.

It's the same dream the great 20th Century prophet Martin Luther King, Jr. had, and it's a dream he saw us achieving together:

"I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted: every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plane, and the crooked places will be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

"This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with.

With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our Nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together; to pray together; to struggle together; to go to jail together; to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day."

God is about to create something new in this world. How do *you* want to be a part of it?

Amen.

Now this *is* Stewardship month, and as a part of educating the congregation about the good this church does for others, and encouraging all who hear to support First Parish through pledges and volunteering, we've had a couple church members over the last few weeks offering testimonials about what this church means to them and why they support it. *This* week we're doing something a little different, and Gail Bernenke has provided *her* testimonial in the form of a re-wording of the classic song "Inch by Inch." So the choir is going to sing Gail's words for us now, and you are all invited to sing along with the Chorus each time it comes around. You can find the lyrics in the insert in your bulletin.