

"LOOKING AHEAD TO THE PAST"

EVERYONE WHO'S EVER PARTICIPATED IN HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS THINKS THEIR COACH WAS THE FIRST ONE TO EVER SAY, "QUITTERS NEVER WIN & WINNERS NEVER QUIT."

HE OR SHE WAS THE ONE WHO COINED THE STATEMENT, "WINNING ISN'T EVERYTHING – IT'S THE ONLY THING."

WE ALL HEARD THEM, DIDN'T WE?

WHEN I WAS RUNNING TRACK & CROSS COUNTRY, OUR COACH WAS A MADMAN WHEN IT CAME TO INSPIRATIONAL SAYINGS. WE WERE SO INUNDATED WITH THEM, WE DECIDED TO MAKE UP A FEW OF OUR OWN.

BUT THE ONES WE CAME UP WITH WERE CHOSEN BECAUSE OF THEIR ABSURDITY. SOMEONE FOUND A HEADLINE IN A NEWSPAPER, CUT IT OUT AND PUT IT ON OUR INSPIRATIONAL BULLETIN BOARD.

"FEAR OF DEFEAT CREATES A RED DEFECTOR."

WHAT IN THE WORLD DOES THAT MEAN?

IT DIDN'T MATTER. WE'D CHANT IT OVER & OVER.

THEN SOMEONE FOUND AN AD & POSTED IT.

"GOOD MILK DESERVES GOOD CARE."

WE ADDED IT TO OUR PRE-RACE CHANTS.

THEN THERE WAS ONE THE COACH PUT UP THAT SOMEONE SAW FIT TO DOCTOR.

INSTEAD OF "BE OPTIMISTIC & SMILE," A FEW CROSSED OUT LETTERS RENDERED THE CHANT "BE TIMISTIC A MILE."

ALL THAT'S A LITTLE BIZARRE, RIGHT?

MAYBE SO, BUT WHEN WE CAME TO THE STARTING LINE OF THE CONFERENCE CHAMPIONSHIP MEET &, ONE BY ONE, CHANTED "FEAR OF DEFEAT CREATES A RED DEFECTOR," "GOOD MILK DESERVES GOOD CARE," AND "BE TIMISTIC A MILE," WE'D ALREADY WON THE RACE BECAUSE EVERYONE ELSE WAS TOO BUSY TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHAT WE WERE SHOUTING ABOUT TO CONCENTRATE ON RUNNING!

IT BACKFIRED ON OUR BASKETBALL TEAM ONCE, THOUGH.

WE HAD A MISERABLE FIRST HALF WITH JERRY ROBINSON MISSING ALL 15 SHOTS HE TOOK.

HE WAS, AS ALWAYS, TRYING TO IMPRESS SOMEONE IN THE STANDS.

THE COACH STORMED INTO THE LOCKER ROOM, THREW HIS CLIPBOARD ON THE FLOOR, GLARED AT JERRRY & SHOUTED, "*ROBINSON, IF I COULD BUY YOU FOR WHAT YOU THINK YOU'RE WORTH & SELL YOU FOR WHAT YOU'RE WORTH, I'D BE A MILLIONAIRE!*"

OF COURSE HE MEANT TO SAY IT THE OTHER WAY AROUND, BUT EVERYONE SPENT THE ENTIRE HALFTIME TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHAT HE MEANT WHILE HE DREW X'S & O'S ON THE BLACKBOARD!

SOMETIMES WE JUST CAN'T FIGURE OUT WHAT IN THE WORLD SOMETHING MEANS.

HOW ABOUT OUR TITLE THIS MORNING?

“LOOKING AHEAD TO THE PAST.”

“WHAT’S UP WITH THAT?”

SOUNDS LIKE A VARIATION ON A MICHAEL J. FOX-CHRISTOPHER LLOYD MOVIE, RIGHT?

IT DOESN’T MAKE SENSE.

HOW ABOUT RE-WORDING IT?

FINDING THE FUTURE IN THE PAST.

THE PROPHET ISAIAH IS SPEAKING IN THE 8TH CENTURY B.C.

IT’S NOT A GOOD TIME FOR THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL.

AND YET ISAIAH WRITES OF HOPE.

HE SPEAKS OF FAITH THAT ENABLES THAT HOPE TO LIVE.

HE IMPLIES A GREAT JOY THAT WILL BE EXPERIENCED WHEN THINGS COME TO PASS THAT HOPE & FAITH HAVE SECURED FOR GOD’S PEOPLE.

IT’S A JOY THAT IS CULMINATES IN PEACE – A JOY THAT HAS ITS FOUNDATION IN LOVE.

THE PROPHET HAS COVERED EACH OF THE MAJOR THEMES OF THE ADVENT SEASON.

LISTEN TO HIS WORDS AGAIN – WORDS, LIKE SO MANY OTHERS, THAT TAKE ON NEW MEANING IN THIS DAY & AGE.

“HE SHALL JUDGE BETWEEN THE NATIONS, AND SHALL DECIDE FOR MANY PEOPLES; AND THEY SHALL BEAT THEIR SWORDS INTO PLOWSHARES, AND THEIR SPEARS INTO PRUNING HOOKS; NATION SHALL NOT LIFT UP SWORD AGAINST NATION, NEITHER SHALL THEY LEARN WAR ANY MORE.”

THAT’S WHAT THE WORLD WILL BE LIKE ONE DAY, ACCORDING TO THE PROPHET ISAIAH.

AT SOME FUTURE TIME THE EARTH WILL BE AS FULL OF THE PEACE GOD CAN BRING AS THE OCEANS ARE WITH WATER.

THE DAY IS COMING WHEN NO CREATURE SHALL HARM ANY OTHER CREATURE IN ALL OF GOD’S EARTH.

BUT FOR NOW, WE SEEM BENT ON DESTRUCTION.

THE WORKFORCE MAGAZINE, “PERSONNEL JOURNAL” PUT TOGETHER THIS INCREDIBLE STATISTIC: SINCE THE BEGINNING OF RECORDED HISTORY, THE ENTIRE WORLD HAS BEEN AT PEACE LESS THAN 8% OF THE TIME!

IN ITS STUDY, THE PERIODICAL DISCOVERED THAT OF 3,540 YEARS OF RECORDED HISTORY, ONLY 286 YEARS SAW PEACE!

IN THAT TIME, MORE THAN 8,000 PEACE TREATIES WERE MADE – AND BROKEN.

IT ALL SEEMS SO FUTILE, DOESN’T IT?

SO WHAT DO WE DO?

WE LOOK TO THE PAST.

WE LOOK TO THE PROPHET ISAIAH, WRITING NEARLY 3,000 YEARS AGO – AND THERE WE FIND THE FUTURE.

OH, BUT HOW?

HOW WILL IT EVER COME ABOUT, WE WONDER?

HOW ABOUT ONE PERSON & ONE COMMUNITY AT A TIME?

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, SOMETHING EXTRAORDINARY TOOK PLACE IN NEWTON, PENNSYLVANIA?

ALL THE CHRISTIANS IN THE LITTLE TOWN PUT MENORAHS IN THEIR WINDOWS DURING HANUKKAH TO SHOW THEIR SOLIDARITY WITH A JEWISH FAMILY WHOSE HOME HAD A ROCK THROWN THROUGH THE WINDOW AND WHOSE MENORAH WAS SMASHED TO THE GROUND AND BROKEN.

THE CHRISTIANS & JEWS OF NEWTON STOOD UNITED DURING THE HOLIDAYS, IN SPITE OF THEIR DIFFERING TRADITIONS.

THAT'S WHAT ISAIAH IS TALKING ABOUT.

THAT'S HOW WE LOOK AHEAD TO THE PAST.

AND THEN THERE WAS THE JEWISH MAN BY THE NAME OF ALBERT ROSEN WHO FOR 28 YEARS VOLUNTEERED TO WORK ON CHRISTMAS IN THE PLACE OF CHRISTIANS SO THEY COULD BE OFF WITH THEIR FAMILIES.

IN ALL THOSE YEARS, ROSEN FILLED IN AS A POLICE DISPATCHER, BELLMAN, SWITCHBOARD OPERATOR, TV REPORTER, CHEF, CONVENIENCE STORE CLERK, RADIO DISC JOCKEY, AND GAS STATION ATTENDANT.

EACH YEAR BEFORE CHRISTMAS HE TRAINED BEFOREHAND FOR EACH JOB SO HE WOULD BE PREPARED WHEN CHRISTMAS ARRIVED.

HE DID IT OUT OF LOVE FOR OTHERS.

THIS IS WHAT ISAIAH WAS TALKING ABOUT.

THAT'S HOW WE LOOK AHEAD TO THE PAST.

YOU MAY REMEMBER HEARING THE STORY OF FRITZ VINCKEN – A STORY THAT WAS TURNED INTO A MOVIE SEVERAL YEARS AGO ENTITLED “SILENT NIGHT.”

IT WAS CHRISTMAS IN 1944.

FRITZ WAS 12 YEARS OLD AND HE & HIS MOTHER WERE LIVING IN A LITTLE CABIN IN THE WOODS IN GERMANY.

FOUR AMERICAN SOLDIERS CAME KNOCKING AT THE DOOR.

ONE OF THEM WAS WOUNDED.

FRITZ'S MOTHER INVITED THE SOLDIERS IN FOR CHRISTMAS DINNER, IN SPITE OF THE GREAT DANGER SHE WAS PUTTING HERSELF IN FROM BOTH THE AMERICAN SOLDIERS AND THE GERMAN GOVERNMENT.

MINUTES AFTER SHE LET THEM IN, THERE WAS ANOTHER KNOCK ON THE DOOR.

THERE STOOD FOUR GERMAN SOLDIERS.

THE WOMAN INVITED THEM IN BUT INSISTED THEY LEAVE THEIR WEAPONS OUTSIDE.

THE WOMAN, HER SON, 4 AMERICAN SOLDIERS & 4 GERMAN SOLDIERS THEN SAT DOWN TO CHRISTMAS DINNER TOGETHER.

FRITZ DESCRIBES THE FEELINGS HE HAD THAT NIGHT WHEN THE GERMAN SOLDIERS SHOWED UP:

I WAS ALMOST PARALYZED WITH FEAR, FOR THOUGH I WAS A CHILD, I KNEW THAT HARSH LAW OF WAR: ANYONE GIVING AID AND COMFORT TO THE ENEMY WOULD BE SHOT.

MOTHER QUIETLY TALKED TO THEM OUTSIDE AND THEN INVITED THEM IN, BUT MADE THE GERMAN SOLDIERS PUT THEIR WEAPONS IN THE SHED BEFORE ENTERING THE CABIN.

SHE THEN TOOK THE AMERICAN SOLDIERS WEAPONS.

WHEN THEY CAME IN THE FEELINGS WERE AWKWARD.

AFTER A WHILE ONE OF THE GERMAN SOLDIERS AIDED THE WOUNDED AMERICAN.

THEN WE ADDED MORE INGREDIENTS TO OUR STEW AND INVITED THESE ENEMIES TO SIT DOWN TOGETHER FOR DINNER.

ONE OF THE GERMAN SOLDIERS, AN EX-MEDICAL STUDENT FIXED THE WOUNDED AMERICAN AND THEN MOTHER READ FROM THE BIBLE AND DECLARED THAT THERE WOULD BE AT LEAST ONE NIGHT OF PEACE IN THIS WAR -- CHRISTMAS NIGHT IN THE FOREST.

AFTER A GOOD NIGHT'S REST, THEY SAID THEIR GOODBYES AND WENT ON THEIR WAY.

THE GERMAN SOLDIERS TOLD THE AMERICANS WHICH WAY THEIR CAMP WAS AND GAVE THEM A COMPASS TO FIND THEIR WAY.

CHRISTMAS SPIRIT & CHRISTMAS PEACE PREVAILED.

THAT'S WHAT ISAIAH WAS TALKING ABOUT.

THAT'S HOW WE LOOK AHEAD TO THE PAST.

THAT'S HOW WE FIND THE FUTURE IN THE PAST.

THAT'S HOW WE FILL OURSELVES WITH HOPE, FAITH & JOY AS ISAIAH DID NEARLY 3,000 YEARS AGO.

YES, THERE IS REASON TO HOPE.

THERE'S A REASON FOR FAITH.

THERE'S A REASON FOR JOY.

THERE'S A REASON FOR PEACE.

THERE'S A REASON FOR LOVE.

THERE IS REASON TO HOPE FOR SOMETHING DIFFERENT IN THIS WORLD – BUT NOT JUST IN THE GLOBAL STRUGGLES THAT CONTINUE TO PLAGUE ALL OF HUMANITY.

THERE'S REASON TO HOPE FOR SOMETHING DIFFERENT IN OUR OWN LIVES AS WELL.

ALL WE HAVE TO DO – AND HERE WE GO AGAIN – IS LOOK AHEAD TO THE PAST.
WE CAN, INDEED, FIND THE FUTURE IN THE PAST.
THE FUTURE BEGAN IN A DIRTY ANIMAL STALL 2,000 YEARS AGO IN THE LITTLE VILLAGE OF
BETHLEHEM.
IT BEGAN WITH A BABY BEING BORN WHO TAKES ANY TROUBLED PAST AND TRANSFORMS IT
INTO A GLORIOUS FUTURE.
THAT'S WHAT ISAIAH WAS TALKING ABOUT.
THAT'S WHAT IT MEANS TO LOOK AHEAD TO THE PAST.
THAT'S WHAT IT MEANS TO FIND THE FUTURE IN THE PAST.
THAT'S WHERE TO LOOK TO FIND YOUR OWN FUTURE.
BECAUSE IT'S ALREADY HAPPENED.
IT CAN'T BE CHANGED.
IT CAN'T BE TAKEN AWAY.
IT'S YOURS TO CLAIM.
LOOK AHEAD TO THE PAST.
THERE YOU'LL FIND HOPE, FAITH, JOY & PEACE.
THERE YOU'LL FIND LOVE.
THERE, IN THAT STABLE – THERE IN THE PAST – IS EVERYTHING IN YOUR FUTURE THAT YOU'VE
ALWAYS LONGED FOR. AMEN.