

The Lessons of Nutella

November 13, 2022

Imagine you find a magic lamp. You rub the lamp, and of course, a genie comes out. The genie tells you that he'll grant you three wishes, and of course you use your first wish to wish for unlimited wishes. Bam! It's granted.

Now what do you wish for? Think about that for a minute.

I think a few wishes are obvious and universal.

#1) Nutella would flow like water wherever you turn, and it would be healthy for you.

#2) Everyone would be able to fly, and going along with that, you'd be able to eat clouds, but who hasn't imagined clouds as tasting like cotton candy?

#3) Dinosaurs. Wish for us to be able to genetically engineer them, or maybe you'd just wish for your own as a pet. But obviously dinosaurs would be a part of the equation.

#4) Some sort of instantaneous travel, like teleportation or wormholes to any location in the universe.

You know, very basic wishes that everyone has.

And after that, of course, would be the mundane.

Unlimited money – for your family, for those in need, for St. Gabriel's. Not enough money to ruin the economy, but enough to do some real good.

Health for yourself and loved ones. Maybe even unlimited life, so that folks could live as long as they wanted.

Looking beyond that, maybe the wealth wouldn't just be for humans. Wish for the earth and all living beings to flourish, so that no creature has to die. Chicken nuggets would appear out of nowhere; no chickens need to be harmed.

Cheap or free source of energy that has no harmful by-products. Enough water, food, and resources for everyone to have (and more).

In summary, for everyone and everything to be happy.

Is that too much to ask? That's the dream. Nutella is just the avenue to happiness.

It's nice to dream, isn't it? And I think that list that we came up with is what most people would want (maybe without Nutella and dinosaurs). In our passage from Isaiah, we hear a list that's

pretty similar. Isaiah is sharing a vision of a new earth. Imagine, he says, what it will be like when God renews all things.

People will live a long time. Anyone who dies at 100 will be considered young. No one will cry or be sad; everyone will be happy. All animals will eat straw so no lion has to hunt to survive; no creatures have to die. There will be a stable economy – crops planted and harvested. People will have homes. Children will be safe and happy.

No one will hurt or destroy another.

A wonderful vision. And it's presented not just as a wish, but as the future. When God comes to reign, that's what the world will be like.

But then Jesus ruins the party. He gives a reality check in the Gospel, saying "Before we get to that wonderful time, there will be wars, rebellions, earthquakes, nation fighting nation, famines, plagues, persecution, unfair arrests, and death." Just a happy picture.

I'll tell you that every year around this time, we hear readings like this. Jesus predicts the end times. And it sounds pretty dour, but to the early Christians, this was good news. Because they were living in the midst of that chaos. Jesus is saying to them, Don't worry; God is still in control. And God's kingdom is coming. It's a word of encouragement not to lose heart. Jesus might as well be quoting the immortal Steve Miller Band, "You've got to go through hell before you get to heaven."

Steve Miller Band. "Jet Airliner." Capitol Records, 1977, CD.

Every year when I hear these readings, I think, "That sure sounds like today." And then I realize that I thought the same thing last year, so I think to myself, "But *this year* especially, this sounds fitting." And I'm not unique. We all have the sense that the times are living in sound like what Jesus is describing. They sound like the end times.

And that's been the case for many hundreds of years. Over and over again, people have predicted that the end of the world was imminent. The Rapture. The coming of God. And often, these doomsday prophets are able to convince a large group of people. Because over and over, people looked around, and they saw the world mirroring Jesus' description.

And every time, people were wrong. The end of the world did not arrive at the appointed time. There is no one final great war, followed by a period of judgment and then endless peace and happiness and Nutella. Every time we predict that we are in the end times, we get it wrong.

Or maybe, I wonder, do we always get it right? Maybe this is not a chronological progression. Human existence, time of mass turmoil, time of peace. Maybe that's just a description of our world and a cycle that it goes through over and over again.

Yes, there are wars today. There have always been wars. And as long as people are people, there always will be violence of some kind. And the same is true of natural disasters, and famine, and persecution. In summary, there will always be injustice.

AND at the same time, there will always be sources of hope. There will be those who are working for peace while nations fight. There will always be those who seek to lift up the poor and disadvantaged. Those who go to areas hit by natural disasters to help. Those who defend people who are wrongfully arrested and speak out against injustice. In summary, there will always be those working for justice and hope.

The end days is isn't a one-and-done event. This is a description of life every day in our world.

The choice for us is, Do we give in to despair when we hear about wars and violence and plagues and famine? Or do we choose to say, "This is the world as it currently is, but we can do better," and get to work? Do we look at the hell, or do we work for heaven?

There's a wonderful quote from Martin Luther, the 16th century theologian. He said, "If I knew that tomorrow the world would fall apart, today I would still plant my apple tree." What an attitude of hope in the midst of difficulty.

Contrast that with a conversation I had this week with local clergy, and we fell into talking about the current state of the world. One person lamented her frustration with the media. Another person then commented, "I don't think we were meant to have 24-hour news." There is something to be said for being informed about current events, and there is also something to be said for turning off the TV or computer or setting down the newspaper and living in hope in your context.

It's easy to give in to despair when all you hear about are the terrible atrocities of the world. It's essential to hold on to hope and to our faith that God is at work in the world. It's also important not to grow numb to the suffering, which is what happens if you see terrible news all day every day. At the end of the day, as much as I hate to admit it, news and media are like Nutella – best when consumed in small amounts.

When you read or watch the news, feel free to lament. Notice the injustice and difficulty that our brothers and sisters experience, that we are privileged to be removed from. Lament and pray, but don't despair. Instead, live in hope. And look for the ways that you can create a more peaceful, just world. Look for the ways that you can make that vision of Isaiah a reality.

Amen.