

Have you ever seen anyone go on a tear?

That is what my dad and my three siblings used to say we saw
when a call was received saying an old friend from Illinois or California
would be stopping by to pay a visit while on their way East.

When Mom got word of such an unexpected visit, —
she would “go on a tear”.

She would speed through the house — our rooms particularly —
straightening everything

and stashing away all of the miscellaneous junk, —
shoes, socks, blue jeans, books, —
strewn all over the place — into closets.

And then her last words at the end of the tear would be, —
“*Don’t dare open any closet door!*”

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Since our first born went off to the University of North Carolina
more than a dozen years ago — shortly followed by his sister, —
Margaret and I, along with a good number of you, —
have become diehard fans of Tarheel basketball.

Heartbreaking to us, Saturday a week ago, after a run of eighteen straight wins, —
Carolina lost to Maryland.

Frankly the Heels did not seem to show up for that game
until the last quarter of play.

And their big man, Tyler Hansbrough, appeared to be almost lethargic
throughout most of that game.

It was awful.

But then on Wednesday, UNC played Miami.
And *Hansbrough went on a tear.*

And on that tear, what did he do?

He scored over and over again, —
even with two or three opposing players hanging on him.

And if he happened to draw a foul on his way up to score, —
he became even more fired up.

And he channeled all of that energy into stunning concentration
on the foul line making fifteen out of sixteen of those shots.

Thirty-five points in all — a season high.

That is what happens when Tyler Hansbrough goes on a tear.

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But what happens *when God goes on a tear?*

Many people will tell us that when God goes on a tear
we better watch out. For it is going to be *bad!*

You may have seen the bill board or bumper sticker, —
“*God is Coming — — Look Busy*”

That reflects the common notion of fear of the judgmental God
whom many expect to come on a tear.

But the prophet of God, Isaiah, paints a *different picture.*

Isaiah utters a song of thanksgiving to God.

And the song describes what God has done

because God has gone on a tear.

“*Zeal*,” Isaiah calls it. “*The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.*”

All that happens that Isaiah sings about happens because of this zeal —
because God has gone on a tear.

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So what does happen?

A whole new day breaks forth.

A whole new era of hope and joy dawns.

“The people who walked in darkness . . .”, —

and using precisely the same word we hear in the Twenty-third Psalm, —

“those who lived in a land of deep darkness —

those who lived ‘*in the valley of the shadow of death*’ —

on them light has shined.”

Some of you will remember the dark days of the Watergate crisis in this country.

After more than a year of investigations and impeachment proceedings, —

it became very clear that President Nixon had indeed

committed “high crimes and misdemeanors”.

And the President had come to the point

where he was obviously emotionally unstable.

Our government was in crisis, — the reigns of power

in the hands of a man under siege and who was dangerously vindictive.

The trust of the people in their Head of State was in shatters.

The future of the Republic was perilously uncertain.

What would happen if Nixon refused to leave office?

How would the nation survive

a trial of the President before the Senate?

President Nixon finally resigned from office

rather than undergoing that certain trial.

And Vice President Gerald Ford was immediately sworn into office.

In his very first remarks as President, Ford said, —

“*My fellow Americans, our long national nightmare is over.*”

And we all breathed again.

A new era had dawned.

When God goes on a tear it is like that.

It is like that for people suffering darkness.

It is like that for people suffering under an oppressive regime.

It is like that for people living — rather, barely existing —

under the ever present shadow of death.

Light dawns.

People breathe again.

It is like discovering instead of expected famine

there has been a bumper crop

which means there are windfall profits for everyone

when no profit at all had been anticipated.

It is like suffering for years under siege from a foreign army

that has devastated your land and extracted onerous taxes from you

which have left you in abject poverty
only to suddenly find out that that army has been totally defeated.
So now you get to divide the plunder
left behind by those fleeing troops.
You get to indulge in burning their boots, —
their battle fatigues and equipment
that once were so threatening.
By doing this you now may relish in gloating over
that once mighty army's humiliation.
It is like the dancing in the streets that happened in Paris
as the Allies rolled into town
and sent the German Army racing from that city in 1945.
It is like the all night party that broke forth in Berlin
when the wall suddenly came crumbling down in 1989.

When God goes on a tear, *that is what happens*.
Our long nightmare ends.
Light dawns. A new era of hope and joy is at hand.
Darkness will not last forever. It will be overwhelmed by light.

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But there is more.
This new era that dawns is an era of *endless peace — shalom —*
perhaps better translated as *well-being*.
And it is a well-being that is brought about
through *justice and righteousness*.

Justice.

Justice here is not revenge. It is not getting even.
It is not even our notion
of wrong doers getting what is coming to them.
Justice here is *God's justice*.
It is God's way of providing a special place, an honored seat, —
for the poor and the widow and the orphan and the alien.
Justice is the way of giving preferential attention
to those who have been ignored and trampled upon, —
the vulnerable, the ones who have no voice and no rights in society, —
the ones marked and written off as sinners.
Justice is the welcoming of these persons
and giving them a place at the table within the life of the community.

And *righteousness*.

Righteousness is the living out the way and will of God.
It is living in relationship to God, to others, —
and to the whole creation in the manner God intends.
Righteousness is living in right relationship by loving our neighbor —
yes, even our enemies — as we also love ourselves.

When God goes on a tear, a new era of peace — of well-being —
built upon this kind of justice and this kind of righteousness *breaks forth*.

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But there is a *huge surprise* that happens when God goes on a tear.
And that is the surprise of who God raises up
to be God's agent in ushering in God's new era.

The first hint of this surprise in Isaiah's song
comes in that reference to the victory over the oppressor coming —
“*as on the day of Midian.*”

We likely have forgotten about Midian.

But the ones who first heard this song would have known what that meant.
That day of Midian refers to the battle won by Gideon
over the cruel Midianites who oppressed Israel, the people of God.

No one in Israel thought Midian could be defeated.

Midian was too powerful a nation for little Israel to overcome.
But God raised up Gideon to lead a charge against the army of Midian.
Gideon of all people! Gideon was from the *weakest clan* in Israel.

Gideon was *the least* in his family from this weakest tribe.¹
And when Gideon gathered up 32,000 troops to wage that battle against Midian, —
God told him he had too many troops.

Gideon cut the number to 10,000.
God still told him he had too many.

When finally Gideon whittled the force down to a measly 300 men
to take on the vast Midianite force who, as the narrator of the battle says, —
were “as thick as locusts; and their camels were without number, —
countless as the sand of the seashore,”² —

Gideon armed those 300 with trumpets, empty jars, —
and torches inside the jars.

Then dividing them into three companies, —
he surrounded the Midianite camp by night.

And at a signal, he had his men blow the trumpets, —
smash the jars, and raise the torches.

And the Midianites, panicked, fled in terror, and were utterly routed.

A total surprise.

A stunning victory accomplished by God through an insignificant person, —
Gideon — and his insignificant band of men.

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When God goes on a tear,
that is the kind of agent through whom God works to bring newness.
And that is exactly what Isaiah knew was happening as he sang out, —
“*For a child has been born for us, a son given to us . . .*”

In that child, a vulnerable, unlikely child, God was at work
bringing God's new era of peace — well-being.

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We know these words so well.

Every Christmas we hear them as Handel's *Messiah* is sung.
And the Church has latched onto Isaiah's song
and seen in it a clear reference to Jesus.

¹ Judges 6:15

² Judges 7:12

Likely, when Isaiah first sang this song, he had in mind the birth of a *different child*.
 He had in mind the birth of *another heir* to the throne of David.
 For in his day, Judah had been suffering
 under the wretched policies of King Ahaz.
 Ahaz, fearful of neighbors, —
 had rushed into an alliance with the superpower of the day, Assyria.
 And in a bid to gain protection from Assyria
 he had relinquished control of sizable parts of the country
 to Assyria.
 He had allowed images of the gods of Assyria
 to be placed in and worshiped in the Temple in Jerusalem.
 And he had caved into permitting Assyria to levy crushing taxes
 from the people of his own kingdom.
 But Isaiah saw that an heir had been born to this house of Ahaz.
 Hezekiah was the child's name.
 And Isaiah saw that God's hand was at work
 delivering the people from the dark era of Ahaz's regime
 unexpectedly through even this child
 born to this terrible king.
 Through this most unlikely one, —
 God would establish a reign of justice and righteousness
 the foundation of an era of peace — well-being, —
 a time of hope and joy
 for all God's people.

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Isaiah knew nothing of Jesus.
 But the Church rightfully has seen in Isaiah's song that Jesus, —
 a most unlikely one, —
 one born to an unwed mother, —
 one from a back country town, —
 one who was a carpenter
 (which meant he was from the lowest of classes, —
 for carpenters and other tradespeople
 were landless), —
 is indeed the One God has raised up to bring well-being to people, —
 the well-being God is determined to provide
 when God goes on a tear.

But notice what happens when this One God has chosen for such a task
 begins his ministry.

Matthew, in describing the beginning of that ministry, —
 quotes this song of Isaiah's.

He quotes it as if to say, —

here in this One, this Jesus, —

God's endless era of peace, of well-being has dawned.

But then, listen closely to the *very first thing Jesus does*.

He *summons four fishermen*.

Fishermen of all people!

Scruffy, uneducated, poor fishermen.

That is who Jesus calls to be his agents, —

his agents to follow him in building up justice, —
in living out righteousness
so that God's era of peace will be right at hand.

Simon. Andrew. James. John.

You. Me.

That is who Jesus trusts to be agents.

“We can't do that,” we might say.

We are not capable of living out God's kind of justice in this world.

We are not good enough to live out God's kind of righteousness
with all we encounter.

What difference can we make?

We have no power, no influence.

But then, —

what does God do when God goes on a tear?

Who does God raise up to accomplish the newness

God is so zealous to bring?

Remember Gideon.

Remember Hezekiah.

Remember Simon.

Remember Andrew.

As the Apostle Paul puts it, —

“God chooses what is foolish in this world to shame the wise, —

what is weak . . . to shame the strong, —

what is low and despised . . . the things that are not, —

to reduce to nothing things that are,”³

When God goes on a tear, a very good thing happens.

A new era breaks forth.

It is the era of peace —

of well-being, built on justice and righteousness.

And that justice and righteousness

is established by agents God raises up while on that tear, —

the most unlikely agents imaginable, —

agents like *you* — and *me*.

Pete Peery

First Presbyterian Church — Asheville

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

27 January 2008

³ I Corinthians 1:27-28