

## A FUTURE WITH HOPE: WE WERE MEANT TO THRIVE

Isaiah 40:28-31

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14 November 2021

I came across an intriguing quote the other day. “God knows all the sciences, but there’s one science God does not know, God does not know mathematics. God knows nothing about math.” I heard this and I started thinking about God as a scientist - God is the most brilliant botanist, ornithologist and astronomer - who else could create **trees** with such beauty, thousands of types of **birds**, the **magnificence** of the **sky**? God is a biologist, a geologist, and surely an environmental scientist. But math? The math of the Bible makes no sense. It’s a long walk from Egypt to Israel, but it’s **not** a 40-year walk. Remember the parable Jesus tells about some people who work all day and some people who work an hour and they get paid the same? The math of the Bible doesn’t compute, logically and rationally. And how about this? The more love you give away, the more you have...it seems to be true, that God doesn’t know math.

How much of our lives do we spend **doing the math**? **Measuring** our accomplishments, **counting** our successes and failures, **comparing** ourselves with others? Sometimes math is necessary. It’s budget season here at church; we have to pay attention to income and expenses, just like we all do at home. But we can become overly-focused on counting everything in life, on seeing life as a ladder that needs to be climbed. If we live in the world of measurement, we are continually assessing ourselves - are we winning or losing? The assumption of the world of measurement is that life is about staying alive and making it through - **surviving** in a world of scarcity and peril.

In an environment of survival, we're alert to danger, we're always on our toes, we're suspicious, we're fearful. Again, just as we have to pay attention to our budgets, there are times when it's prudent to be alert and even cautious. But is that a way to walk through high school and college? Do you want to live that way every day of your working life? Do you want to sit down at Thanksgiving dinner feeling you're at some sort of competitive event? Whose children are the best-behaved? Whose side dish is the most gourmet?

When we only think mathematically, we get to know each other and things by measuring them, by comparing and contrasting them.

What if we, instead, realized that we live in a world of **possibility**? What if we were to focus on **thriving** rather than surviving? Instead of measuring, let's engage our **imaginations**. Instead of counting, let's **dream**. Instead of competing with one another, let's imagine new, better and abundant futures together...futures that will insist upon all of our gifts working together - the gifts of the scientists and the poets, the liberals and the conservatives, the young and the old and the in-between, those who are afraid of change and those who crave it.

It's hard to step out of the world of measurement, the world of survival. We learn to live that way at such a young age. Michelangelo is often quoted as having said that inside every block of stone or marble dwells a beautiful statue. The work of the sculptor is to remove the excess material to reveal the work of art within. In the best possible scenario, a child encounters a teacher who sees who they are deep inside...and helps chip away at the stone, getting rid of whatever is in the way of each child's developing skills, mastery and self-expression.

But when the child who doesn't test well faces one standardized test after another, too often the masterpiece he or she was created to be remains hidden. The child doesn't reach her potential, and it's a loss for her and the whole world.

Benjamin Zander was the conductor of the Boston Philharmonic and taught graduate students at the New England Conservatory. These young and very talented musicians had lived in a competitive environment from the time they were children. They lived in a chronic state of anxiety, and Zander observed that, paradoxically, this obsession with performing kept them from becoming their best. So he tried something new one fall. He said to the students on the first day, "Each student in this class will get an A for the course. However, there is one requirement that you must fulfill in order to earn this grade. Sometime, during the next two weeks, you must write me a letter dated next May, which begins with the words, 'Dear Dr. Zander, I got my A because...,' and in this letter you are to tell, in as much detail as you can, the story of what will have happened to you by next May that is in line with this extraordinary grade. You can tell me about goals, but I'm most interested in the **person you will have become** by next May...your attitude, your feelings, your worldview. I want to hear that you are in love with the person you're describing in your letter."

He wanted them to become not just better musicians, technicians, but people who were well-rounded and healthy, so that they could live the competitive life of a professional musician with their souls intact. The result was some incredible letters and success stories, success in the broadest understanding of that word.

He was helping to reveal the person they were meant to be. He was guiding them towards thriving, living in a world of possibility rather than the world of competition which actually was diminishing their talents.

Our scripture passage for today is originally a message to and for a weary people, people whose homeland had been conquered by a foreign power. These are not just words written to help people survive. It's not self-help literature, so that people would keep a cheery, positive attitude. These words remind people of who they are, and who God is.

The prophet reaffirms for people during a time of invasion and exile that God is still the Creator, God is the one who does not grow weary, God is the **strength-giver**, the **encourager**, the **source of endless energy**. And there **is** a sense of energy in this whole passage. It moves, it has a pace..."Do you not know? Have you not heard? God is the everlasting God...Those who wait for God find a renewed power; they soar on eagles' wings, they run and don't get weary, they walk and never tire."

And that energy which comes from God, originates with God, is transferred to God's people...tired people, powerless people...young women who are weary, young men who stumble and fall. God will give them strength, understanding, and power. God will give us strength, understanding, imagination, dreams; God will help **us** see the possibility in life. **God wants us to thrive.**

There is a verse in the New Testament which gives us a partner, parallel message - I Corinthians 5:17 says, "When we are in Christ, we are new creatures. Old things have passed away, and new things have come."

Is there anything more hope-filled than that message? We **can** change for the better, at any age, at every stage of life. We can put aside old habits that no longer serve us, unhealthy ways of being. We can **dream** and **imagine new possibilities for ourselves and for our world. We can thrive. It is the purpose for which we were created. We are meant to thrive.**

In honor of Veterans Day this past week, we're sharing a true story of a man who chose to see the possibility rather than the limitations of his life, a man who learned to thrive: (<https://watch.inlightenstream.com/programs/finish-the-race>)

Over the past week, all of us who are on the church mailing lists were sent a letter and a pledge card asking for our financial commitments to support the ministry and mission of this congregation in 2022. We are asking that you prayerfully consider your financial situation, what this church means to you, and what God is calling you to give, and return your commitment card by the end of this month. I'd be happy to speak with you about various giving options and how to make the decision about how much to give.

I firmly believe that this congregation plays a vital role in our own personal lives and in the life of Cuyahoga and Lorain counties. We are a resource for people in need - whether that need is a **tired parent** desperate for encouragement, an **anxious teen** longing for a place to belong, a family without a church at a time of crisis...or whether that need is the homeless shelter asking for volunteers to deliver meals to hotel rooms...the domestic violence shelter starting a podcast so their message can be spread...I could tell you story after story about how we have served individuals and groups, especially over the past 20 months.

I do not want this congregation to have to worry about survival, about how we will pay our bills. I don't want us to live in the realm of counting and competition. I want us to thrive, so that we can dream and imagine together even more meaningful possibilities for service. Let us draw upon the energy and strength of God's spirit; let us soar on eagle's wings, run and not get weary, walk and never tire. Let us continue, God willing, to thrive.

Please join me in prayer. God of infinite possibility, don't let us settle for a life of mere survival. Help us to dream with you of better futures for all your children, and help us work together to make those dreams a reality, beginning right here in this place. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Resource cited: [The Art of Possibility](#), by Benjamin Zander and Rosamund Stone Zander