

Pastor's Message – 11/13/22

Isaiah 65:17-25

We just finished another election, although some elections are still not decided. The television ads are done, no more mailings, no more unwelcome texts on our phones. Each candidate has different ideas and solutions, but each of them has that one thing in common: elect me and things will be different, things will be better. Elect me and heaven will come upon the country.

Humanity has had images of heaven probably since people could dream and there have been lots of names for heaven since that time: utopia, paradise, Shangri-La, nirvana, etc. Heaven is not a new concept and not a new dream.

In the decades preceding the Civil War, a certain idealism among some people led to the founding of communities called Utopia because the founders were intent on trying to create societies as close to perfect as they could. Ohio's Utopia, for example, was established in 1844 by followers of French philosopher Charles Fourier who called for "intentional communities" based on equal sharing of resources and labor. The people who came to that Utopia were spiritualists who wanted a secluded area to practice their religion. Utopias have not survived.

This failure of utopian societies to survive can cause us to read Isaiah 65:17-25 with a jaundiced eye, for that passage describes a divine remaking of Jerusalem *where the old problems will be no more, where there will be no weeping or sounds of distress, no infant deaths, no fruitless effort. It will be a place of joy where every adult will have a long and full lifespan. In this new Jerusalem, the residents will not worry about encroachment or threats from outside or from each other. Even wild animals will peacefully coexist. And God will anticipate their needs, answering their prayers before they even utter them.*

So: is that a utopia? A vision of heaven?

The people of Israel during the time of Isaiah were facing tough times. After 60 years in captivity in Babylon, a remnant of Israelite survivors, battle-worn and world-weary, was allowed to return home. When they came back from Babylon, though, what they found was not very promising. Nothing was the way they remembered it. Everything they had built had been destroyed. They had returned home, and their homes were no longer there. Coming up with a plan for moving forward was not easy.

I think about all the people in Florida whose lives were drowned by the recent hurricane and are again by another hurricane or the people of Ukraine who had to flee their homes, sometimes with nothing but the clothes on their back, and of other peoples around the world affected by disasters, whether natural disasters or man-made. They left their houses and their belongings and had to wait patiently, not knowing what was happening to their possessions, their lives completely upended,

until it was safe to return home. Some people went home to find everything as they had left it. Others came home to find a house still standing, but many things destroyed and a massive clean-up and restoration to undertake. And of course, some returned to find everything gone.

You've probably heard the expression, "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is [too good to be true]. What purpose might the utopian vision in Isaiah have for us who are readers of the Bible today? If it sounds too good to be true, why even read it or believe it to be possible?

For one thing, it should have much the same impact as does the Lord's Prayer, when we understand that the petition "thy kingdom come" is *not* talking about heaven or some realm that comes in the afterlife. We are actually praying that the full reign of God as Sovereign of this world will occur soon, so that *right here on earth* people will treat one another just as God wants them to, and that holy living by everyone will be a foregone conclusion.

When explained that way, the phrase, "your kingdom come" may seem as much like a pipe dream as any utopia. Human nature seems too unreliable. Human greed seems too strong. Self-centeredness seems endemic. Acts of "inhumanity" are unfortunately too much a part of the "human" fabric. Many of the same sins that people committed 4,000 years ago are still committed today, so where's the evidence that we are any closer to the goal that God's will be done on earth just as it is in heaven?

But the fact is, *though we get mired in the problems, pains, and sins of life as we know it, we need to have the vision of life as it ought to be held before us.*

It was to this type of situation that Isaiah spoke the words from his sixty-fifth chapter. As I've already said, this was an extremely difficult circumstance in which to speak. And as I mentioned last week, at some time or another, we may have all been in survival mode at some time in our lives. What do you say when people are in crisis, when they've lost everything, and the future doesn't look very promising? What could the Lord, through the mouth of Isaiah, say at this point that would help these returning refugees?

Isaiah says that he has been listening carefully for the voice of God, and God has spoken. Through Isaiah, God speaks a word of hope and promise to the chosen people:

"Look! I am creating new heavens and a new earth,
and no one will even think about the old ones anymore.

Be glad; rejoice forever in my creation!

And look! I will create Jerusalem as a place of happiness.

Her people will be a source of joy." (Isaiah 65:17-18).

What do we do when things go wrong, when our lives fall apart, and we don't know what to do or where to turn or how to keep going on? What do we do when life seems to have backed us into a corner and we simply can't find the strength or the courage to go on? What do we do?

We run to God. Because God is the only one we can really count on to turn things around. God is the only one we can trust to make all things new.

A new heaven and a new earth.

A place where God is so near that "before they call, God will answer, and while they are yet speaking, God will hear."

A time when "the wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox, the serpent's food shall be dust, and they shall not hurt or destroy on all God's holy mountain."

A word of hope from God, through Isaiah, to the people of Israel, during their most desperate hour.

Many people, some here in this room, some watching over Facebook Live, need to hear promises of hope from God from time to time; and our reading from Isaiah 65 today gives us a great opportunity to speak God's promise of hope. We need to remind people of the power of God to heal even the most broken and damaged things imaginable. They need to hear the promise that God is so powerful, so loving, so amazing, and so steadfast that literally nothing is beyond the possibility of God's healing. God IS able to make all things new in any situation. They need to hear that, to feel that, to KNOW that, so that they can be strengthened for whatever trial lies ahead.

"Listen," says the Lord God. "Hear what I'm saying to you. I am about to make all things new. Everything from the past will be forgotten. The slate will be wiped clean, and you will be completely freed from even your memories of this time. Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight" (Isaiah 65:17-19, paraphrase).

Isaiah's proclamation of God's intent to create a new heaven and a new earth sounds downright idyllic. In this glorious new creation, we are all going to live longer, happier, and more peaceful lives. The image is one of wholeness, healing, and reconciliation. I believe this is God's deepest desire, to live in right relationship with us. And despite our wild absurdity and warring madness, I believe human beings have a deep desire for that relationship also.

But along with that desire comes responsibility. Wholeness in relationship requires that all parties are engaged and active in making it work. We are not passive recipients of God's dream; rather, we are active participants in bringing it to fruition.

I believe that God is doing a new thing – continuously. I also believe that the glorious new creation is not something that will happen *to* us, but there, Gods' glory will be revealed in time *by* us. "I am creating new heavens and a new earth," God

says. What if we lived in a constant state of anticipation of the fulfillment of God's promises in Isaiah 65:17-25? What if we stopped wondering when the weeping will cease, and started doing more to invite such a time? What difference would it make to our world right now if we lived as if this vision of blessing was the only truth that mattered, no matter when it would come to pass? How would it encourage our faithfulness and outlook and perseverance? We all can make a difference.

It reminds me of an old story I remember.

The clouds hung heavy and grey in the sky on a cold, wintry day in Kentucky. A horseman came to a bend at the top of a hill on a dirt country road. A sparrow was lying on its back in the middle of the road. Its tiny legs were sticking straight up in the air. The horseman stopped and watched for a minute. Then he spoke to the little bird: "Sparrow, what on earth are you doing?"

The sparrow answered him back, "I heard the heavens were falling in today, so I'm ready to hold them up."

"You think you're going to hold up the heavens with those spindly little legs?" laughed the horseman.

"I'm doing what I can," said the sparrow.

Think about the parables of Jesus in Matthew 13 for a minute. Unlike Isaiah and the prophet Zechariah, Jesus didn't describe the kingdom. Instead, he used comparisons: "The kingdom of heaven is like" In these particular parables, he tells us the kingdom is like a tiny seed that grows into a great tree, tiny yeast that leavens the entire day's baking, treasure hidden in a field and a pearl that a person wants so badly that he will sell everything else he owns to purchase it. These parables are all about the kingdom of God within us. Those who follow Jesus possess the seed of the kingdom, the yeast of God's love, and the treasure of the Good News, the message that is valuable beyond all others.

We need to hear about the kingdom of God which Jesus illustrated by comparison and the Isaiah passage described through vision, for because it is already begun, we can model it here and now in and through the church.

Sure, we cannot do it *perfectly*, but the church of all places should be at least an outpost of the kingdom of God where the needs of each member are the concerns of all, where the elderly are loved and cherished and remembered, where children are loved and safe and free to explore, where God is worshiped by the whole community and where we never cease in our efforts to help others.

We can't do it perfectly, and it won't be a utopia or paradise or even Shangri-La, but a vision that helps us to translate the vision of Isaiah into something that is real.

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on *earth* as it is in heaven.

Help us to do our part to make it so, Lord.