

Highland Presbyterian Church
23rd Sunday after Pentecost – November 13, 2022
“Our New Heaven and New Earth”
A sermon by Megan McCarty

Romans 8: 18-30

Isaiah 65:17-25

Our church calendar year begins with Advent, which this year starts on the Sunday following Thanksgiving. So, as we draw to the close of one church year and prepare to start a new one, the texts provided for us in the lectionary tend to get more and more apocalyptic the closer we get to the end of the year. Our main text here, Isaiah 65, is an example of one of those apocalyptic texts. Now, I want you all to know that I steered us clear of some of the crazy apocalyptic texts of famine and pestilence and instead steered us toward something with a little more hope. So, you're welcome for that.

Most scholars agree that the book of Isaiah can be split into three different parts. Chapters 1-39 are attributed to the 8th century BCE, which was before the Judeans lost the Jewish/Babylonian war and were held captive in Babylon, a period of time known as the Babylonian exile. Chapters 40-55 were written in the 6th century BCE during the Babylonian exile, and although there is not quite a scholarly consensus on the origins of Isaiah 56-66, most see this material as reflecting the struggles of those who had remained in Jerusalem and Judah with the leadership who returned following the Babylonian Exile.

So, this particular section that we just read in chapter 65 is a prophecy assuring those who are struggling, that there will be a time where they will be blessed with the undisturbed enjoyment of all that is needed for their happiness. The former confusions, sins, and miseries of humanity will not be remembered or repeated in this new heaven and new earth. We know from history and from other chapters in the Bible that conditions were difficult for those Judeans who experienced the period of history within the Babylonian exile. Those who remained had to deal with the invading armies that colonized Judah. They experienced violence and trauma on a daily basis. Then they had to adjust to the leadership who returned to Judah after two generations in Babylon, and we see a lot of conflict between them in these chapters.

We read throughout this last section of Isaiah how this remnant community is trying to deal with all the conflict. They are trying to put the war and trauma behind them. So, they are not focusing on the world as it is before them, but as it should be. The Book of Isaiah here is quoting a speech from God to Israel. God promises to soon create a new heaven and a new earth, a promise that we often see in apocalyptic literature. The power of this promise comes in the second half of verse 17: “the former things will not be remembered or come to mind.” This is a powerful promise to anyone who has experienced trauma. Now, let's be clear, this is not the way that modern health care professionals would encourage us to handle trauma – to just push it to the back of our minds and try to forget about it – but it's easy to understand why this message would be such a sigh of relief to so many, especially in an age without the knowledge of mental health that we have today.

We see evidence in God's speech of the amount of trauma that Israel suffered while living under the oppression of their foreign conquerors. They know that their children have died of malnutrition on account of the injustices under this foreign rule. They know that their labor has been exploited to build the homes of their oppressors rather than their own homes. And, while the foreign oppressors have been replaced by the leadership who returned home, they still live in a land without empathy. So, the prophet has to imagine what a land *with empathy* would look like for them: a land without violence and destruction where the wolf and lamb or the lion and ox will live peacefully together.

The key to this vision is a lack of vengeance. God does not call the remnant in Jerusalem to learn from their oppressors or adopt the way of their oppressor. Instead, verse 24 sheds a light on what is so badly needed in this society who has been through collective trauma: the need to speak and be heard. God says, while you are speaking, I will hear; before you call me, I will answer; I will be there. Whether we call it gaslighting or evading, there are very few things that are as distressing as to cry out continually in suffering and see the situation remain unresolved. God refuses to let their cries of distress go unresolved.

While these words were written for a certain community in a particular moment in history in a particular place going through a particular situation, they are also written for everyone. Isaiah invites all of us into a theological vision of what life can be for God's faithful people. Having just gone through midterm elections in our own country, this oracle from Isaiah is speaking to us; calling us into conversation to consider the conflict, divisions, and lack of empathy that exists right here.

In 2018, Arlie Russell Hochschild wrote a book titled *Strangers in their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. In this book, she describes the empathy walls that have been built up in the United States of America. Hochschild says that an "empathy wall" is an obstacle to deep understanding of another person, something that can make us feel indifferent or even hostile to those who hold different beliefs or whose life experiences are rooted in different circumstances.

While we can see how it is easier for foreign oppressors to construct these walls, the end of the Book of Isaiah is dealing with a situation in which these walls built by oppressors remain, despite the return of the leadership to Jerusalem. As is so often the case with returning immigrants, refugees, or exiles, things have changed. The returning leadership have both intellectual and monetary resources that allow them to try to reimpose their religious vision within Jerusalem, but things have moved on and the remnant are trying to hold on to what sustained them under the brutal foreign oppression. This is clashing with what sustained the returning leaders during the exile; so, this is where we see so much of the lack of empathy.

When we look around, we see a similar situation of division and lack of empathy in our country. America has only become more polarized since Hochschild wrote her book, evidenced by the Black Lives Matter Movement and MAGA Movement. Large groups of Americans support these movements, and large groups oppose them. There is a desperate

need to build empathy bridges instead of empathy walls between the polarized groups in the United States. That is exactly what we see happening in this oracle from Isaiah. Rather than declaring one group right and punishing the other group, this oracle imagines a world in which both these groups coexist peacefully. They still have their salient characteristics: a lion is still a lion as well as a lamb being a lamb, but they coexist peacefully; even happily.

We overcome polarization and hatred when we can see the world as God sees it. We will only be able to construct empathy bridges if we have that gladness, joy, and delight of a grace-centered view of the world. The world of sin and evil constructs empathy walls. Isaiah 65 is a call to tear down these walls so that we can put ourselves in the shoes of another and see what another person feels. It is only when we see others as children of God and remind ourselves of the holiness in every person that these walls start to crumble.

Today is pledge dedication Sunday. Many of you have already turned in your pledge and many others will do so today or in the coming weeks. These pledges are promises of money that is what keeps this church going financially. But these promises are so much more. They are a tangible way to bring about this vision of a new heaven and new earth. As Christians, we are called to do the work of tearing down empathy walls. It's worth recognizing that there are still walls that need to be brought down within our congregation. The last few years have seen conflict and trauma within our walls, so the need to reach across the aisles has never been more crucial.

This church is called to build bridges and work to create God's kingdom on earth. That's what we're really doing here. That's what all of these pledges are for. That's why so many of you volunteer your time and are pledging to do that more. We all believe and want to work for the collective beautiful vision of a world where there is mutual respect and peace. I wonder what we will do this year to take us a step closer to that reality? I wonder when the apocalypse comes around at this time again next year, what will we have accomplished? What will we be able to point at and say, this is what our pledges did; this is who Highland is and this is what we are doing. Now is the time for us to listen to and be inspired by the prophet's words to create something new. A new heaven and a new earth is right now. What are we going to do with it?