

Isaiah 65:17-25 and Luke 21:5-19: **A Tale of Two Futures**

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Listen with me for God's word to us from the book of the prophet Isaiah, chapter 65 (CEB):

- ¹⁷ Look! I'm creating a new heaven and a new earth:
past events won't be remembered; they won't come to mind.
- ¹⁸ Be glad and rejoice forever in what I'm creating,
because I'm creating Jerusalem as a joy
and her people as a source of gladness.
- ¹⁹ I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad about my people.
No one will ever hear the sound of weeping or crying in it again.
- ²⁰ No more will babies live only a few days,
or the old fail to live out their days.
The one who dies at a hundred will be like a young person,
and the one falling short of a hundred will seem cursed.
- ²¹ They will build houses and live in them;
they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
- ²² They won't build for others to live in, nor plant for others to eat.
Like the days of a tree will be the days of my people;
my chosen will make full use of their handiwork.
- ²³ They won't labor in vain, nor bear children to a world of horrors,
because they will be people blessed by the Lord,
they along with their descendants.
- ²⁴ Before they call, I will answer; while they are still speaking, I will hear.
- ²⁵ Wolf and lamb will graze together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox,
but the snake—its food will be dust.
They won't hurt or destroy at any place on my holy mountain, says the Lord.

A tale of two futures. That's what we hear in today's Bible readings. That there's more than one vision shouldn't surprise us, because scriptural voices often dialogue with each other. God's word comes to life in these vibrant conversations — conversations into which you and I are also invited.

From Luke's gospel (21:5-19) we heard Jesus give a short scary speech that scholars call the "Little Apocalypse." Apocalypse means "unveiling," and what's unveiled here is brutality in the world. Jesus describes God's temple demolished, war, starvation, family members betraying each other, execution. Jesus seems to be talking about ugly realities that we all recognize, but as a vision of the future it plays on my worst fears.

And from the book of Isaiah we heard, in God's voice, a future world that's built around the best of good news: abundance, longevity, rejoicing, peace, peace, peace. Folks at a hundred years old just getting started in life. So much satisfaction and joy that nobody needs to weep. Predation is no more and *all* the animals have become vegetarians. I love it, and I wonder: Can I believe in this?

Jesus' apocalyptic vision seems all too real, and I don't want that world. Isaiah's hopeful vision I desperately want to come true, and it can feel so farfetched. It feels like Jesus is bearing witness here to one kind of truth, and Isaiah is bearing witness to a very different kind of truth.

This morning our Feasting on the Word adult ed class had a lively conversation about these vivid texts. As always, I felt enriched by how the Holy Spirit speaks through God's people. Around the table we shared feelings and ideas and questions that these biblical words inspire in us. I'll share here a few of the questions living in me.

Is either of these visions the inevitable outcome of history?

Is Jesus' catalog of horrors "just the way the world works"?

Is Isaiah 65 giving us a sweet but impossible dream — supporting Karl Marx's famous line that "religion is the opium of the people"?

How much do humans, especially we people of faith, have an influence on either of these futures coming to pass?

"They will harass you because of your faith....[Y]ou will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will provide you with an opportunity to testify." What a time to hear those words from Jesus. Many political leaders in our time testify about their own lives of faith, including our governor who addressed the Kentucky Council of Churches a few weeks ago. Many not-famous public servants, and many faith leaders, also have tried to speak the truth and to carry out their missions faithfully, and for their efforts they often find themselves at the center of a political apocalypse in which Americans demonize each other in the name of God.

Beyond American political drama, it's not hard to perceive other signs of a scary future like Jesus depicts. Jesus tells his disciples not to fear when institutions they trust start crumbling, like the temple. And all around our world we watch the thin veneer of civility get bashed by those with power and sometimes bashed by those without.

In such a messy world we might try to stay out of the fray and just live quiet, ethical lives the best we can. Yet trying to do the right thing doesn't guarantee any of us safety. Jesus warns his followers that holding fast to godly truth and justice may very well *get you into trouble*. That's because truth and justice don't help the powerful amass more power. Truth and justice don't help the wealthy build bigger barns for their stuff.

Movements for truth and justice can be threatening to people on top of the heap. That proved true for the early church living under the Roman Empire, just as it's true for us living in a time of American Exceptionalism. And even as many of us point fingers at "those corrupt rich people," we also must acknowledge that by global standards, you and I have more power and resources than most humans ever dreamed of. Maybe God is calling on us to repent, collectively, of our self-satisfaction.

And that takes us back to Isaiah, to that much more joyful vision of the future. Isaiah projects an image of God's peaceable kingdom. The prophet depicts the beloved community of all God's creatures. But prophets in Israel were never wishful thinking types. So if the book of Isaiah gives us hope, it's a hard-earned hope that emerges out of passionate wrestling with God and puzzling over the human condition. In fact Isaiah's gracious depiction of God's future comes at the end of a section that starts very differently. In the chapters just before this one, the exiled people of Israel cry out their angst, accusing God of abandoning them to their suffering.

But then *God* responds with a lament of God's own:

I held out my hands all day long
to a rebellious people,
who walk in a way that is not good,
following their own devices... (Isaiah 65:2, NRSV)

When I read that verse I couldn't help thinking of us following our own devices... [hold out iPhone]

One Isaiah scholar puts it this way:

The evasive tactic of blaming God, which was only hastening the disintegration of community, [gets] addressed through an expression of divine truth. The [people's] problem was self-centeredness, a preoccupation with "their own devices" that excluded any consciousness of God's will.... By centering on human schemes rather than on God's order of compassionate justice, the nation was falling into a captivity as destructive as any ever imposed on them by a foreign power.... The people were admonished to integrate into their institutions and social structures the justice and mercy for which they prayed to God.¹

Alright... Is that only about ancient Israel or might the Bible be speaking once again into our own place and time?

Then and now, God says to God's people: "Justice and mercy are in your power to establish. Fulfill your calling to live out *shalom* — wholeness — and extend that circle of wholeness as broadly as you can. And here's my vision of what that looks like."

A pastor taking up a call at a new church got my attention when he said, "I believe that the church — as pitiful, broken, and messed-up as it can be — is the primary means by which God acts and speaks in the world."

Could that be true? I wonder. What do you think? *Is* the church God's primary way of acting and speaking in the world? If so, what could God say and do through us, and through the millions of our churchy siblings all around the globe? To what kind of truth could our lives bear witness? And are we establishing and extending God's *shalom* in the world?

Shortly in this service we'll gather our collective financial and personal commitments, praying that God may use all of us in 2026 to extend that circle of wholeness. Highland Presbyterian also has inherited resources from previous generations of the faithful, putting us in an incredibly privileged situation compared to most churches. We have investments called the Stodghill Fund, the Legacy Fund, and the Memorial Fund, which were created largely from bequests and memorial gifts. Income generated by those funds contributes substantially to our church's annual budget, and it helps us maintain these aging buildings and take new missional risks.

But those gifts of the past cannot sustain the needs of current ministry. If we tried relying only on legacy funding, ministries would wither and half of us staff would have to leave. So much ongoing mission and care and worship and advocacy would be lost. That's why each year Highland needs

¹ Hanson, Paul D. *Isaiah 40-66. Interpretation series.* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012. p. 241.

members and friends to make a financial pledge: so that we all who *currently* worship and serve in this church are also invested stewards in ministry. So that we all encourage each other to faithfulness and love, and so we help cultivate that *shalom* in God's world.

Isaiah 65 lets us peek into the *shalom*-saturated future that God desires. I'm grateful for that glimpse of a possible world that's healed and whole. And that word from God offers yet another gift. The peaceable kingdom, the community of abundance — those aren't simply human creations, even if we join in God's mission. Because in this vision *God* does new things that we can't. God recreates heaven and earth themselves. God revitalizes humans and all our fellow creatures. God has given humans the ability to choose not to be predatory. But I can't even get our housecats to stop hunting crickets in the basement, so there's no chance humans can transform lions into grazing animals. That level of re-creation would take divine intervention.

Best of all from Isaiah 65, God promises a new kind of divine intimacy: "I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad about my people.... Before they call, I will answer; while they are still speaking, I will hear." Out of this whole vision, this may be the thing I most yearn for: God's immediate presence and clear communication. All my life I've wanted to have a direct conversation with God.

It's hard to proclaim that God's going to fix everything in the end. I want to believe Isaiah's words! The evidence in front of us looks a lot more like the world of decay and persecution that Jesus warns us about. We all know that real life is hard and sometimes terrible. At the same time the painfulness feels like it's not what should be, like it's against what God intends.

Jesus tells his followers that hard and terrible things *will* happen in this world, and through all of it he encourages a faithfulness that overcomes fear. Jesus goes on to practice what he preaches.

Because Jesus experienced all the hard things too. And Isaiah experienced all the hard things too. Ultimately both, with their lives and their witness, point toward that beautiful future that's grounded in God.

"Be glad and rejoice forever in what I'm creating,...
They won't labor in vain, nor bear children to a world of horrors,
because they will be people blessed by the Lord."

In the name of God our Origin,
God our Here and Now,
and God our Future.