

19.11.17 “Partners in God’s Project” - New Heaven and New Earth
Isaiah 65:17-25 - Rev. Adam Hange

Today is a celebration, and in my book, a Sunday doesn’t get much better than a Sunday that begins with a baptism! It is a truly joyous and delightful day! A day to celebrate the grace and renewal promised to us through the gift of faith. It is an awesome thing to witness a young person, and a family, make this testimony of faith...**And**, if you noticed, the vows we make at Baptism are pretty powerful.

“Do you promise, by the grace of God to be Christ’s disciple(s), to follow in the way of our Savior, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, and to witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ as best you are able?”

That’s a lot for a 4 year old to think about, or even the parents of a 4-year-old... Frankly, it’s a lot of any of us to commit to... and yet those are the words we say at baptism. That is at least some of what we believe we are committing to through this symbolic act of faith, in community.

More often, we tend to think of baptism in terms of personal renewal, and that is certainly a part of the symbolism, however, it being baptized is also about becoming a partner with God, and the community of faith, in building up the kin-dom of God on earth - God’s Holy Realm.

That’s the fine print in the “user-agreement” that is the Baptismal certificate! Particularly as we grow into mature faith, we hope that the renewing work of our baptism will be evidenced in us finding our own ways to resist evil, show love and justice, and bear witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ

Furthermore, baptism is about holding on to the hope that God is already at work in us, and in the world around us, and that we have a role to play in the unfolding story of God’s redemptive work in the world... At its core, baptism is about hope - radical hope - for how we will live in this world, and the next.

In a similar way, the theme of today’s passage from Isaiah is Radical Hope - and Faith. For me, this passage is a statement of hope and faith - a testament to the belief that God is, first, aware of the brokenness that exists in the world - of all “the unpleasant things” as L’Engle so gently puts it - and also that God is not just some “unmoved mover” - some “cosmic clock-maker” - but one who *cares*, and is deeply attentive to our daily concerns, and, that God is ready and able to do something about it, indeed, that God is already at work in a cosmic re-creation, bringing this new heaven and new earth into being.

It's interesting phrasing, isn't it? New Heavens and New Earth. It begs the question, "Why would we need a new Heaven and New Earth?? There is an apocalyptic shadow that hangs over such a phrase, and yet it's not hard to imagine us needing these, in light of almost daily news about the devastating effects of climate change. A few weeks ago it was wildfires, this morning I woke to the news of the repeated flooding of Venice, one of the cities most susceptible to rising sea levels.

One might make the argument that, given the reality of the climate crisis, a "Planet B" might actually be worth seeking. Colonizing Mars is looking less like science fiction with each passing year! In fact, I worry that, in our desire for a "New Heaven and New Earth," we would convince ourselves that we can discard this planet - like so many other things - instead of learning to care for it.

On the contrary, the biblical vision of a new heaven and new earth which we read about in Isaiah is not a vision for the colonization of some other planet. Which is good, because as yet there is no hope of a Planet B. It was never meant to be taken literally - but rather spiritually. It does not mean replacing the earth we have, so much as learning to coexist in this world together with Creation in an entirely new way. In the way of Shalom.

It is an admission that the way that we have been living in this world, is not sustainable. For, even as we read this Prophetic Vision - Isaiah's "I Have A Dream" speech - there is a hint that what has been, is not now, and has not been in the past, as it should be.

To put it simply, there is much room for improvement. Notice how many times it says, "No more shall," and consider those things have happened, and frequently. You can sort of read between the lines and understand that the people who are the intended audience for this message, must have been living with great anxiety and fear.

Concerns for the health and welfare of the very young, and very old.

Concerns for housing, agricultural, and economic security.

Concerns with worker rights, fairness, and justice.

Indeed, this was written to a people living in exile under Empire. They had clearly known tears, for why else would the prophet say, weeping and mourning shall be no more?

The prophet uses poetic language, and prophetic imagery, to name some of the hard but real things that they must have been facing. In consolation, the prophet offers a vision of what might be, what will be, instead of what has been.

It does seem rather utopian, and it is meant to. The vision put forth here, harkens back to the vision of the Peaceable Kingdom from Isaiah 11. Predator and Prey will sit side by side in peace. If you've ever visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art - you may have seen one of the more famous versions of "The Peaceable Kingdom" - painted by Edward Hicks American - Quaker - Society of Friends - painted 62 versions - Same theme from Isaiah 11/Isaiah 65. It's a very simple but powerful image - my favorite part is the somewhat startled looking lion!

The Lion shall lie down with the lamb. This is a vision of a future with hope. While some today may look to the past and sing of "Glory Days!" for others, the only direction to look and find hope is to look to the future - to a time when the "former things shall not be remembered or come to mind." Your perspective depends largely on the amount of power, privilege, and opportunity you enjoy - in the past, present, or future.

This was written to a people living in exile... a people who had been pushed from their homeland, and taken off to Babylon. Much of the scriptures are about the identity of God's people as an oppressed group, and it should be noted that their own history had stories of the genocide of other peoples, and the capture of other people's land.

Nevertheless, this is written as a message of hope and assurance to people who must have desperately needed to hear such a message. The book was likely written over several hundreds of years, and only parts can be attributed to the historical Isaiah himself. Isaiah 41 promises a "second exile" when the Judean people will be allowed to return from Babylon to their own homes - a promise that would one day be fulfilled under Cyrus of Persia.

Scholars will note that this portion of the Book of Isaiah is part of "third Isaiah," very near the end of the book. It's likely that this section was written once, and edited, then placed here in the book, to follow a lament in the chapter previous, before going into a call to repentance in the next chapter. It's fitting that Prophet's account focused on what constitutes "True Worship" revisits the same theme again near the end of the book.

Isaiah 1:16-17

Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean;
Remove the evil from your doings from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,
learn to do good;
Seek justice, rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow

The interpretation of the situation is that they had forgotten to do these things, and that is how they found themselves under conquest, forced into exile. If as a nation, they repent, if they amend their ways, they will see God's faithfulness, and witness the vision a new heaven and new earth come to pass.

What would a new heaven and new earth look like to you?

How about a world where people are free from fear? Fear of illness. Fear of hardship. Fear of violence. Fear of deportation.

A few weeks ago I preached the parable of the persistent widow and shared that for several years, a group has been gathering at the County Courthouse, advocating for it to be "off-limits" to ICE without a warrant. People were fearful to come to a court hearing or pay a fine, and risk deportation. Today I celebrate the ruling by Chief Justice Martha Walters - which asks only that ICE have a warrant issued by a judge in order to enforce at the courthouse - ending the intimidation.

No matter, God has the capacity to create new heavens and new earth!

I love the vision of the peaceable kingdom - from v. 25, but my favorite line is V. 24 - "Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear." Have you ever been at some family or community gathering, where someone has anticipated your wants and needs? Just when you are about to ask for something - it appears. Before the words are even out of your mouth - it's as if the person could read your mind. That's another level of love and care. To the Prophet - that is how God cares for us. Before we know what we need, God already knows.

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.

We should remember the vision of the Peaceable Kingdom is not brought about by power or might, by waging ever greater wars. It is brought about through Shalom.

*The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;*

I'm hopeful that peace can be made between nations, but how about this a vision for a modern-day Peaceable Kingdom? How about...

Millennials and Boomers,
Republicans and Democrats,
sitting and eating together, in peace,
at the same Thanksgiving table.
Is that some pie-in-the sky Utopian vision?

Don't we all seek the welfare of our children? Don't we all care about access to housing? Don't we all care about access to healthcare and the chance to live to a ripe old age? Don't we all care about the rights of the worker - when we are workers, too?

The vision of a New Heaven and New Earth - set forth by the prophet Isaiah is a Messianic vision, which foreshadows the arrival of Christ as the anointed one - one coming to demonstrate a new way of being. Jesus, who lifted up the lowly, who cared for the widow and the orphan, an advocate for the oppressed. When he says, the Kingdom of God is at hand, he is speaking in the same prophetic terms. It is not something that comes through might. It is not something that emphasizes greatness. It is a different way of being in this world. As we prepare ourselves for the beginning of Advent, in a few weeks, we are reminded of how deep the longing for this new reality is buried in the human soul. Incidentally, "A New Earth" is the theme of the Advent Devotional for this year. It's ripe with meaning - at this moment in our global history.

May we find hope in God's Vision, and may we seek to find one small way we are able to participate in that re-creation of the heavens and earth. Sending a card. Making a call. Serving a meal. Showing up in solidarity. Offering our home...

We are partners in God's project of bringing shalom - peace with justice - into this world. Let celebrate one more partner and the hope and faith that comes with baptism, and pray for God's grace to lead and guide, support and sustain us. Let us delight in the work of God in this world!

Let the Church say, Amen!