

This text from the prophet Isaiah imagines the unfolding of a new heaven and earth. Isaiah is writing at a time of destruction and uncertainty for his society, and he yearns to know that God is present in their time of trouble. Isaiah is desperate for a future in which things are run by God's righteousness – not by the pain and injustice of their reality.

Isaiah presents us with an apocalyptic vision. We tend to associate *apocalypse* with terror and destruction at the end of the world, but its core meaning is in fact *uncovering* or *revealing*.

This pandemic has *not* created new heavens and a new earth. The lives and livelihoods lost are not signs of a new world, where former things shall not be remembered. The catastrophes our world is experiencing on global and personal scales are merely manifestations of life on earth as too many have long known it. This pandemic did not cause some people to work too many hours for not enough pay, but our current crisis sheds light on the fact that some of us have reserves to fall back on and others simply don't. This pandemic did not cause a legacy of racism that is embodied in unequal access to health care, but our current crisis reveals that critical care is most available to those who are white and wealthy. This pandemic did not cause only some children to have the comprehensive support they need to learn and grow, but our current crisis reveals how many kids are kept from flourishing because they do not have enough. This pandemic is an apocalypse in both senses of the word: it is both filled with the horrors of what seems like the end of the world *and* it unveils what our world has always been.

Isaiah's vision begins by telling us that what he is describing are *new heavens and a new earth*. Our theological tradition has long been filled with the understanding that, following the destruction of the end of the world, a new world will emerge. In our Christian culture, we

understand this at an individual level too: when someone dies, we might imagine the splendors of heaven and God’s warm embrace awaiting them. Our belief in a risen Christ teaches us that all who seek God’s love will also rise again into the Everlasting Arms.

The vision that Isaiah casts is one of imagining what things will be like in God’s heavenly realm. We can use this text to get a glimmer of what it will be like to dwell with God forever: we will no longer suffer and weep, and we will always know the truth of God’s presence. But Isaiah does not limit this kingdom to the hereafter: in this prophetic vision, heaven and earth are part and parcel of the same world-to-come. He is speaking from the theological perspective of *not yet* – despite the pain of this world, there is hope that another way might yet be possible.

In Jewish practice, when a member of one’s immediate family dies, the bereaved recite a prayer called the Kaddish each day for up to a year. This prayer does not directly address death, grief, or the soul’s ascent to heaven. Instead, it is made of two alternating parts: praising God and yearning for the establishment of God’s kingdom. These elements make up one of Judaism’s most familiar prayers, and they are also the core of Christianity’s most familiar prayer – indeed, the Kaddish and the Lord’s Prayer are close cousins. One begins *glorified and sanctified be God’s great name* and the other *hallowed be Thy name*; one hopes that God *may establish His kingdom in your lifetime* and the other prays that *Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*.

The Kaddish, the Lord’s Prayer, and Isaiah’s vision have several things in common. They all know God to have particular concern for the poor and downtrodden – they know that the realities of this world are unfair and painful, and they believe that this breaks God’s heart even more than it breaks ours. They all believe that another world is possible: that God’s kingdom is

yet to come, and one day, life on earth will reflect God’s abounding mercy and love. And they all believe, deep in their core, that we are not powerless when it comes to establishing the kingdom of God. They teach us that our prayers change us – and when we are changed, we transform others too.

By now, you have heard it said that the coronavirus pandemic is putting us all in the same boat: that the virus doesn’t care who you are, where you live, or how much money you have. By now, you have also heard that, though the virus itself may not care, our society is not made up of equally sea-worthy boats. You know that neighboring towns and zip codes have radically different rates of infection and death depending on the income or racial make-up of who lives there. You know that some of us can work from home with a little discomfort but that too many others are wondering how they will continue to pay rent and put food on the table. You know that, while every child has lost the stability of their teachers’ presence and the joy of in-person friendship, too many children have also lost the security of regular meals and access to a place that will enable them to learn.

When Isaiah says *they shall not build and another inhabit*, I remember that God does not demand that people work hard to keep others safe while having inadequate shelter for themselves. When Isaiah says *they shall not plant and another eat*, I remember that God does not ask for people to sacrifice themselves in a land of plenty. When Isaiah says *they shall not labor in vain or bear children for calamity*, I remember that God hopes more for us – for all of us – than making it through the day just to struggle through another. I remember that God creates us *to be a joy*, that God’s people – *all of God’s people* – are created *to be a gladness*.

What do you hear in these words? What inequities, revealed anew, have been on your heart? Perhaps you have been assembling lunches to donate to people experiencing homelessness, and you find yourself thinking of all those facing housing and food insecurity. Perhaps you were inspired by the medical debt relief initiative this church and hundreds of others have donated to, and you find yourself worried about all those newly saddled with crippling medical bills. Perhaps you joined in the blessing of this church’s new drop-in youth room, hoping that all who enter would find safety and love, and you find yourself wondering about the wellbeing of our surrounding community’s young people.

When the pains of this world threaten to overwhelm us, it is tempting to want to hide. But the words of the familiar prayer are ready on our lips so that we can continue to turn to God and say: *thy kingdom come, thy will be done, **on earth** as it is in heaven*. The Kaddish and the Lord’s Prayer have always been prayers of regular people – not something special reserved for priests or prophets. These words are familiar to us so that we can recite them as often as our hearts are broken.

Praying this prayer is like signing up with God – it’s like saying, *I see what’s going on here, God. I believe you want better, and I do too – so let’s be in this together*. Isaiah’s vision, spoken from God’s voice, says, *before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear*. It’s like God is saying, *I see what’s going on here – I hear you. I believe you want better, and I do too – so let’s be in this together*.

When we pray this prayer, we are signing up with God – but we are not only committing ourselves to be in this *with God*. The Lord’s Prayer begins *Our* Father, and continues speaking from the plural – it imagines us praying as a community, not as individuals. Its cousin, the

Kaddish, requires that it be prayed in the company of at least ten people. The logic of these prayers requires that we not go it alone – and this is equally true for forming a spiritual community as it is for bringing about God’s kingdom on earth.

Both the Kaddish and the Lord’s Prayer are daily prayers. This does not mean that their work can be done in a day – it is the very opposite. The work of tending to a life of daily prayer can only be done in small pieces – a few moments a day, one day at a time. In just the same way, God’s kingdom will not be ushered in with a flash – this is not work that can be done in a day. Tending to God’s kingdom can only be done in small pieces – each of us joining together, a few moments a day, one day at a time.

The Kaddish, the Lord’s Prayer, and Isaiah’s vision all know God to have particular concern for the poor and downtrodden – they know that the realities of this world are unfair and painful, and they believe that this breaks God’s heart even more than it breaks ours. They all believe that another world is possible: that God’s kingdom is yet to come, and one day, life on earth will reflect God’s abounding mercy and love. And they all believe, deep in their core, that we are not powerless when it comes to establishing the kingdom of God. They teach us that our prayers change us – and when we are changed, we transform others too.