

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
November 17, 2019  
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph  
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Isaiah 65:17-25  
Canticle 9: First Song of Isaiah (Isaiah 12:2-6)  
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13  
Luke 21:5-19

In the first of our readings this morning, we heard the powerful words of Isaiah, a prophet holding before us the image of a new beginning, a new world:

*For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;  
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.  
But 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.*

Michael Curry likes to say that Jesus came to help us transform the world from the nightmare it often is into the dream God intends for it – and for us. Jesus typically used parables to make the point. Even before Jesus, though, the prophets, too, spoke of God’s dreams for us and for our world. They most commonly relied on poetry and metaphor to get the same point across.

Sometimes it seems like the Old Testament prophets are harsh. They go on a bit about doom and gloom and dark days of God’s judgment. But this morning, at least, we hear that the goal is redemptive. Isaiah’s desire is to help us dream and work toward a world full of all that is good.

His words would have seemed impossibly good in their day, words of hope spoken to a people returning home from exile to a land left in ruins. And they are good news in our own day still, painting a picture of a world so far removed from the one we know too well. On the heels of news of yet another shooting in another high school this past Thursday, the prophet invites us to imagine a world without weeping and without sorrow over the senseless deaths of innocent children. In spite of dire predictions of climate change and the degradation of the planet, Isaiah talks about a world where every child of God is promised a full and rich life. Instead of a world where too many fail to get ahead, we dream of a world where everyone receives their due and nobody’s efforts go unrewarded. As the gap between rich and poor grows, we look for signs of a world where the powerful do not take advantage, but rather offer security.

And because it all seems so far removed from removed from what we know, the prophet has to fall back on poetry and metaphor:

*The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,  
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;  
but the serpent-- its food shall be dust!  
They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.*

The only problem – and I have to tell you, it’s a big one! – the only problem is that the creation of this new world requires the end of the old world; they cannot coexist.

It's entirely natural that such a prospect would be frightening to us. That's where Jesus' words come into the picture for us today:

*... some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down ...*

*Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven."*

And there you have it. For all that we may find attractive about an amazing new world such as is promised by Isaiah and so many other prophets, we've grown quite fond of what we've made of the one we know already. We like our temples, our homes, our securities, our knowledge of how to get along in the world. And it takes the words of a prophet to remind us that this world we've helped create won't last.

Paul Duke, a Baptist preacher, says that hard truth is the Bible's truth:

Every story has an ending, a final page, a last word trailing off into silence. Scripture stubbornly insists that the story of creation itself will arrive at an ending. The whole great dance of things will come to a stop. Sounds and stirrings in space will cease. Histories will terminate. The lights will go out. The whole show will close down, the door will slam shut. God may open another door after that closing, a door to another room for another dance, but the only dance we know about is headed for an End. <sup>i</sup>

And, of course, this is not merely something we learn from the Bible. Life teaches the same hard lesson. The great cosmic ending of all history is prefigured and rehearsed in countless other smaller endings known to each and every one of us along the way – the death of a loved one, the end of a relationship, the loss of a job. And on it goes: before the great Apocalypse at the end of time, we experience lesser apocalypses again and again. "The end of the world revisits us over and over. Every crisis trembles with the final Crisis. Every ending rehearses the End."

But on the heels of Isaiah, I'm not at all convinced that the conclusion we should draw from all of this is simply the rather dismaying realization that "everything-we've-worked-for" will come to an end in the end. In point of fact, what we learn from every one of the lesser endings we experience in life is that every ending is but prologue to a new beginning. Even as he speaks of a final end, Paul Duke, the Baptist preacher, offers this hope for us: "God may open another door after that closing, a door to another room for another dance ..." And I hope I don't sound naïve when I paraphrase what the Mother Superior said to Maria in *The Sound of Music*: "when God closes a door, somewhere she opens a window."

I am rather persuaded to believe that the God we worship is a God always looking to open new doors and calling us to learn a new dance. That's the God of the prophets, so far as I read them.

That, too, is the God announced by Jesus throughout most, if not all, of his public ministry. The Resurrection itself declares to us that we can expect God to open that new door, to make way for a new dance, to write a new story. We reaffirm the same at every funeral when we say: "All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia." <sup>ii</sup>

Jesus tells his disciples that everything sacred to us will be lost to us along the way – our labors, our loves, our lives – but only, I think, to make way for something sacred to God to become manifest in our world... and *through* our labors and our loves and our lives.

There's a story told about St. Francis. He was out weeding his garden one day when someone asked him what he would do if God sent an angel to tell him the world was going to end the next morning. St. Francis said, without hesitation, "I would finish weeding my garden." That's the point, I think. We put our houses in order. We weed our gardens. We do not fear the end, either that of the world or of our own part in it. And when the nightly news and the daily papers continue to be mostly bad, let us imagine what it would be like to live as though we are already in the world God dreams of. And let us live into the joy and wonder of it all.

And maybe, just maybe, we could ease the shock of it all by working in the here and now to make our world a little bit more like the world Isaiah insists is the way God is aiming to make it eventually anyhow. Maybe we'll be a bit more prepared by working on Isaiah's list: to reduce infant mortality and improve maternal health across the globe; to safeguard the rights of the working poor who labor so hard and receive so little; to protect the planet and share our resources with those in developing nations; to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; to place the demands of justice for all people above the political aspirations of a few.

In other words, let us dare to imagine a world where ...

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

Everything comes to an end. I think we have to allow that there's a lot of truth in that rather stark reality: everything comes to an end.

In the light of that reality, the only reason we can give thanks is our hope that the God who created it all in the beginning will be there waiting for us at the end – and at every one of our personal endings along the way – with arms open wide to take us in and lead us on to a new story not yet written:

*For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;  
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.  
But 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.*

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<sup>i</sup> Paul D. Duke, "Ruined Temples," first published in *Christian Century* (Nov. 1, 1995).

<sup>ii</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 499.