**Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19**

**26th Sunday after Pentecost**

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Today’s lectionary readings present us with two starkly different images: from the prophet Isaiah, a vision of everything coming together; from Luke, a vision of everything falling apart.

To a people returning from exile in Babylon, Isaiah offers a vision of a new beginning. “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.”

As the first group of exiles returns from Babylon, you can imagine how exhausted they must have been from trying to keep the dream of home alive. You can imagine how hopeless their future must have looked when they finally made it back to Jerusalem: the city was in ruins, their homes were destroyed, and the Temple was no more.

With Israel’s golden years now long behind him, they struggle to imagine how to begin over. This word that God would bring about a new beginning must have been music to their ears.

Luke’s audience faces a very different reality.

The disciples have come to Jerusalem expecting their journey with Jesus to end with his victory, only to be told it will all come crashing down. Speaking of the Temple, Jesus says, “the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

You will know that this is about to happened because you will see

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.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Indeed, for some, it appeared the world was indeed about to come to an end recently. I mean, who would have ever imagined that the Cubbies would win the World Series?

Isaiah gives us a vision of newness and hope. Luke gives us a vision of chaos and destruction.

As I have listened to the conversations around me this week, I have been acutely aware that the discussions have been as schizophrenic as the realities presented by today’s scriptures, the deep divide between them almost unfathomable. I hear those who are experiencing a renewed hope for a future they have long sought; and, others who are experiencing a deep sense of despair that this new reality will no longer include them.

I know I’m not telling you something you don’t already know -- we have been living with this dissonance for some time now. It’s not because of the election that we are experiencing these different realities, but the days leading up to it certainly helped uncover the rawness of division and pain in ways we have not known before.

Nevertheless, we find ourselves at a point of deep brokenness – even among family members and dear friends, where things have been said to and about each other that should never have been said and where, despite the change in rhetoric in recent days, words of violence and hate and, in some places, acts of violence and hate, continue.

And still we gather as a community of God’s people – week and week after week – each of us with our different realities, different feelings, different longings and hopes. We come to hear about the future not that a new administration can bring - Republican or Democrat - but about the future that God is bringing and which we are invited to help bring about.

Our realities may seem far apart but God’s vision seeks to draw us together. Occasionally we adjust and re-calculate our dreams, but God’s dream for us has never changed. That vision of newness to which God calls us is one of wholeness and healing, of radical inclusivity and peace: new heavens and a new earth in which division and enmity are healed.

In God’s kingdom, according to Isaiah, Jerusalem will be restored to a paradise like that described by the prophet as “new heavens and a new earth,” where infants don’t die, where all people live long lives; where “the wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox and they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain….”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann describes this vision as “as recipe for the impossible.”[[4]](#footnote-4) He writes,

…. It is impossible to imagine a government genuinely committed to justice for the poor and righteousness for the meek. It is impossible that there will be a reconciliation of the animal world. It is impossible that ‘they will not hurt or destroy.’ It is impossible that there will be a homecoming of the wounded and despairing.[[5]](#footnote-5)

And so, he continues,

… [most of us] are resigned to the possible, which entails endless injustice, relentless hostility, pervasive displacement, all adding up to despair. We are resigned to the possible as the *world* defines the possible, except for those who cling to the vision of this text and others like it. Those who make a difference, [those] who refuse [to settle for only what is possible], cling to it.[[6]](#footnote-6)

As Christians, we are not called to settle for only what the world says is possible. We are called to affirm and work toward God’s vision of the world. In the words of an affirmation of faith that comes to us from the Iona Community:

It is not true that this world and its inhabitants are doomed to die and be lost;

This is true: for God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that everyone who believes in him shall not die, but have everlasting life.

It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction;

This is true: I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

It is not true that violence and hatred shall have the last word, and that war and destruction have come to stay forever;

This is true: for to us a child is born, to us a son is given, in whom authority will rest, and whose name will be Prince of Peace.

It is not true that we are simply victims of the power of evil that seek to rule the world;

This is true: to me is given authority in have and on earth, and lo, I am with you always, to the end of the world.

It is not true that we have to wait for those who are specially gifted, who are the prophets of the church, before we can do anything:

This is true: I will pour out my spirit on all people, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young people shall see visions, and your old folks shall dream dreams.

It is not true that our dreams of liberation of humankind, our dreams of justice, of human dignity, of peace, are not meant for this earth and its history;

This is true: the hour comes, and it is now, that true worshipers shall worship God in Spirit and in Truth.[[7]](#footnote-7)

So, what does that mean for us?

As Christians, it means we are called to unite, not around the agenda of one political party or one administration, but around the vision that God gives us, one that calls us to seek wholeness and healing, and one that calls us to go out into the world and share the good news of God’s love for all people, especially those who are so desperate to hear it.

We are called to speak grace to those whose craving for heroin overpowers their desire for God;

to speak hope to those whose economic instability threatens their future;

to speak mercy to those whose failing health makes them prisoners in their own bodies;

to speak peace to those who are afraid, comfort to those who are lost, love to those who are hurt.

For God has said, in the words of Eugene Peterson:

Pay close attention now:

I’m creating new heavens and a new earth.

All the earlier troubles, chaos and pain are things of the past, to be forgotten.

Look ahead with joy.

Anticipate what I’m creating:

No more sounds of weeping in the city, no cries of anguish;

My people will be as long-lived as trees, they will have satisfaction in their work.

They won’t work and have nothing come of it,

They won’t have children snatched out from under them.

Before they call out, I’ll answer.

Before they’ve finished speaking, I’ll have heard.

Wolf and lamb will grace the same meadow, lion and ox eat straw from the same trough, but snakes – t hey’ll get a diet of dirt!

Neither animal nor human will hurt or kill anywhere on my Holy Mountain.

This is a vision around which we can come together. This is a vision to which we can commit our financial resources. This is a vision to which we can commit our time, our energy and indeed, our whole lives. Thanks be to God.

1. Luke 21:6, NRSV. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Luke 21:10-11, NRSV. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Isaiah 65:25. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 107-109.

 Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “Affirmation from South Africa” in *Iona Abbey Worship Book* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2001), 82-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)