

The Isaiah Vision

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church
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Isaiah 65:17-25

Look, the creation of a new heaven and a new earth!
What used to be will not be remembered.
It will not come to mind.
Be glad instead.
Rejoice forever in what I am creating.
Look, the creation of Jerusalem as joy and her people as gladness!
I will rejoice in Jerusalem.
I will be glad in my people.

The sound of weeping will not be heard in her any more, nor the sound of distress.
No infant there any more (who lives only) days, nor an old man who does not have his fill of days.
Die at a hundred years? You were just a kid!
Don't make it to a hundred years? You were cursed!

They will build houses and live in them.
They will plant vineyards and eat the fruit.
They will not build (houses) for others to live (in).
They will not plant for others to eat.

The days of my people will be like the days of a tree.
My chosen ones will outlast the work of their hands.
They will not tire themselves out for nothing.
They will not bear children for tragedy.
Because they are offspring of those the Lord has blessed, and their descendants with them.

Before they call, I will answer.
While they are still speaking, I will hear.

The wolf and the lamb will graze together.
The lion will eat hay like the ox.
The snake will have dirt for its bread.
They will not do harm and they will not cause ruin anywhere on my holy mountain, says the Lord.

Our World Belongs to God 54

We call on governments
to do justice
and to protect the rights and freedoms
of individuals, groups, and institutions,
so that each may flourish.

We urge governments and pledge ourselves
to safeguard children and the elderly
from abuse and exploitation,
to bring justice to the poor and oppressed,
and to promote the freedom
to speak, work, worship, and associate.

Sermon

We know what kind world we want to live in. We want a world that's part city and part small town, part farm and part forest. We want to live someplace exciting and someplace peaceful. We want to live someplace safe and secure, where kids play unafraid on playgrounds and in backyards, where old people live out their last years rocking on the front porch telling the rest of us stories about the old days, and where people who work hard can enjoy times of rest. That's the kind of world we want to live in. And we don't want that world just for a chosen few who are protected by the Border Patrol and security fences. We want that kind of world for everyone. But the real world is so different.

In the real world, children — hundreds of thousands of them around the world — are forcefully recruited into national armies and into makeshift militias. These children are used as front-line soldiers, as human mine detectors, and as sex slaves.

In the United States, we want no child left behind. But in the real world, classroom doors of opportunity are closed and locked before too many children. And in the real world, children are too often caught in the crossfire of violence, sometimes in the home, sometimes on the street.

Old people may dream of rocking on the front porch, telling stories to a circle of family and friends gathered round. But in the real world, that dream too often fades into a nightmare of depression, incontinence, and lonely dependency. In the real world, we all dread having to put mom or dad in a nursing home (some of you know this all too well). And we fear winding up there ourselves.

That's children and old people. What about those of us in the middle?

People with good jobs these days work harder than ever. And in the real world, job security is a thing of the past. Downsizing, outsourcing, or other "restructuring" can throw you out of work and into "transition" in a heartbeat. And rest? Many Americans are so insecure in their jobs that they don't even take the two weeks or so of vacation they have coming. And when they do take vacation, they often bring work along. (Have you done that?)

Then there are people with lousy jobs, often more than one at a time. What about them? They are the working poor. They have no security. They get no rest. They clean our offices. They serve our meals. They say, "Hello," to us when we walk into Walmart. Barbara Ehrenreich has called these people the "major philanthropists of our society." Here's what she says of them: "They neglect their own children so that the children of others will be cared for; they live in substandard housing so that other homes will be shiny and perfect; they endure privation so that inflation will be low and stock prices high" (Nickel & Dimed).

That may be the real world, but it's not the kind of world we want, not for ourselves and not for others, whether children or old people or people in between. And that's not the kind of world God wants either.

The prophet Isaiah announced a vision of hope for a broken world. Israel was a mess. Jerusalem was in ruins. It had started at the top, with the rich and the famous and the powerful. Prophets, priests, and kings were corrupt. They had sold themselves, sold their religion, and sold the government to the highest bidder. Obedience and faithfulness to the LORD were a distant second place at best. Wealth and power and brute force were the new currency of comfort and security.

But the bottom fell out of that economy, and the currency proved worthless. Invasion followed, along with siege works, fire, and exile. Grief and sorrow became the order of the day. House and vineyard were abandoned to squatters. City and palace and temple became the haunts of vandals. The dream of milk and honey became a nightmare of bitter water, sour wine, and maggoty bread.

Over top of this bleak canvas, Isaiah the prophet painted a picture of hope. He colored a new creation, dipping his brush into hues of joy and gladness. The sounds of weeping and distress would give way to laughter and song. Wine would flow in homes rarely touched by death. And hard work would pay off with lasting rewards. In this new creation, God's benevolent presence would always be near, unimagined peace would break out between everlasting enemies, and misery would be banished altogether.

In a word, Isaiah announced the coming of shalom. Shalom is the transforming blessing of God poured out into this world. The slate is not wiped clean by shalom. Rather this world is restored, this world is renewed, so that ruin and misery become distant memories and so that life takes its proper shape for children, for old people, and for people in between who are working hard to make a life for themselves, for their children, and for their parents. Isaiah paints this picture of shalom in order to kindle hope in Israel, who were living with the depression, incontinence, and lonely dependency of exile.

But this hope is not just for Israel. From the beginning, God has intended shalom for all creation. Human beings, despite all the contrary evidence — and there is plenty of it — human beings are stewards of creation. We are agents of shalom. We are God's giant green thumb. Where we put our hands, the result is to be abundant, flourishing life. Or course, that's nothing like what we see. That's nothing like what we have managed to do all these millennia.

Shalom is disrupted in this real world. Children die. Old people live out their days in shame. People who work hard keep falling behind. And there's no rest. And the rest of the creation is groaning in misery, yearning to be set free from what Paul the apostle calls its bondage to decay (Romans 8) — a bondage that fouls water, air, and soil, a bondage that litters forests and rivers and plains, a bondage that paints brown smudges across skylines, a bondage that floats black, oily smears into reservoirs.

There is no shalom. We don't see shalom. We never have seen shalom. We don't remember shalom, not as far back as memory can go.

We need a new creation. We need God to plant joy and gladness and peace in the middle of this world. We need God to shove death aside with the power of life. We need the holy mountain to be transformed from a place of harm and ruin to a place of redemption. We need a cross to cast a life-giving shadow that protects us from the scorching rays of a merciless sun.

We need a new creation. We have Jesus. Jesus is the firstborn of the new creation. By his life and by his Spirit, shalom is breaking into this world. The time is coming — and it is coming without fail — when he will “make everything new” (Revelation 21:5). Jesus's resurrection shines the first ray of light from the new world, a new world that will eclipse every painful memory of this broken world we call home, a new world not just for Israel, not just for a chosen few, but for all people and things within the broadly stretched arms of God's grace. That is what we are expecting.

Meanwhile in Jesus Christ we are ambassadors and servants of that hope (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:20). Like all ambassadors, we are citizens of another country. Our home, our heart, and our hope all are where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God (cf. Colossians 3:1). But this is not some remote location, disconnected from this world. Jesus is with us. By his Spirit, he is with us every day. The kingdom, his kingdom of shalom, is among us. We see it. We have tasted it. We have peace with God. We have shalom with God. That's the anchor and foundation of our life, of our witness, of our service.

As ambassadors, we bring a message from our home country. This message is for both governments and citizens. It is for both the powerful and the pawns. Our Testimony captures it well:

We call on governments
to do justice
and to protect the rights and freedoms
of individuals, groups, and institutions,
so that each may flourish.

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to safeguard children and the elderly
from abuse and exploitation,
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and to promote the freedom
to speak, work, worship, and associate.
(Our World Belongs to God, 54)

This connects closely, you may notice, with much of what we have been involved with these last years as part of the BREAD organization, which is an approximation of biblical vision.

Our message could be summed up simply along these lines:

*All who have the power to act must act,
as stewards, as God's intended agents of shalom,
to restore and renew neighborhoods and cities, states and provinces, and whole nations,
so that children don't die, but live in safety,
so that old people don't languish, but live out their days with dignity,
and so that people who work hard don't fall forever behind,
but enjoy the fruit of their labor and have Sabbath rest.*

That's our message, the message we bring as ambassadors of Jesus Christ and his kingdom.

We are also servants, servants of hope in Jesus Christ. Not only do we declare a message, we put that message into action. We join with others where we can. We join with Christians. We join with Jews and Muslims. We join with atheists and agnostics. We join together for the safety and well-being of children. We join together to give honor and care to old people. And we join together so that working people aren't prisoners of poverty. We join together, and we work together. And we suffer and we cry and we laugh together. And we do it again and again, renewed and strengthened by God's Spirit and Word and Sacrament.

And this is our evangelism. This is how we announce and live the good news. As Raymond Fung points out in his little book, The Isaiah Vision, doing this hard work for the sake of children and old people and people who are working hard — doing this hard work with others opens doors. Through those doors we bear witness to the source of our strength, which is God and the holy church, which is the Spirit and the Word and the Sacrament, which is the fellowship we share and prayer. Through the open doors we bear witness to the source of our strength, and we invite others to come and see. Come and see what gives us strength. Come and see who motivates us. Come and be strengthened with us. Come and be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ (cf. 2 Corinthians 5: 20)!

That's a vision to hold on to. That's a vision to work for. And for now, at least, that the kind of world we want to live in.