



November 13, 2022

Isaiah 65:17-25

Invest in New Beginnings

Prayer: O God, in Christ you give us hope for a new heaven and a new earth. Grant us wisdom to interpret the signs of our times, courage to stand in the time of trial, and faith to witness to your truth and love...

This image is of a painting called “a naive drawing in the style of of an ancient map of Jerusalem,” it was done to communicate Christian brotherhood and peace among Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. It was painted in 2011.

You can see beginning on the far left, images of some of the world’s nations – the taj mahal, statue of liberty, big ben, Brazil’s Christ the Redeemer statue at the top, Russia’s Red Square, the Sydney opera house, Easter Island is upside down, in the center we have the Western wall of the second temple, with the gate to Jerusalem and the cemetery which is there now, the Mosque called dome of the Rock, and this church which looks to me like the church of the holy sepulcher which was established in the year 335, commemorating the place Jesus was buried and rose from the dead. There’s more there, those are highlights. A river that flows around Jerusalem, maybe connecting to outside waters – it looks almost like a moat. If you look closely you can see people boating on it.

I like this. It is joyful, interesting, colorful and playful. It refers to history but it is not trying to be slavishly accurate. It is seeking to convey harmony as the world has grown, as we are now, bringing together the three Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Which conveys a convergence of billions of people today. It is an idea, a vision.

Isaiah offers a vision not in painting, but in poetry. Like this painting, it is not strictly accurate, but it brings together enough details to encourage you to use your imagination and paint your own vision of peace and prosperity.

This part of Isaiah was written when the children of Israel are faced with the monumental task of rebuilding a ruined city, ruined temple, and a ruined people – the people of Judah. The second temple was rebuilt in 515 BCE, so Isaiah may be writing as late as the year 520.

You can hear their laments: bloodshed, wickedness, miscarriages of justice, oppression, one plants a vineyard but cannot hold on to the property long enough to enjoy the harvest, another builds a house and someone else takes it and lives in it. But the prophet offers a word of hope, to those who are discouraged by the injustice of their time. Isaiah's words are unusual: the promise of "new heavens and a new earth" this does not get mentioned again in scripture until near the end of the book of the Revelation to John, the final book in our Bible. John picks up this image and brings it forward as he writes the conclusion not only to the Revelation, but also for the entire Bible.

Veterans Day was this week. My father in law served in the air force in WW2. His vision for a good life meant primarily coming home alive. Many of those he served with did not. He carried that with him his whole life. Living quietly, raising a family. His vision was shaped by his experience of war. One of his deepest hopes was that his three sons would not have to see war as he had.

We had an election this week. A lot of us are still processing what happened, what is going on in this country, and in this world. All those election polls, but pollsters can't predict the future, there's always surprises. How are other Americans wanting to build our life together? How do we think about the winners and the losers?

And did those feet in ancient time

*Walk upon Englands mountains green:
And was the holy Lamb of God,
On Englands pleasant pastures seen!*

*And did the Countenance Divine,
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here,
Among these dark Satanic Mills?*

*Bring me my Bow of burning gold:
Bring me my arrows of desire:
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire!*

*I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In Englands green & pleasant Land.*

This is William Blake's poem Jerusalem published in 1810. He imagines Jerusalem built in England. And this is the kind of imagination that Isaiah has – a new heaven and a new earth. There's no fixed idea of what specifically that will be. It will be built creatively, and you can well imagine, given what you know already, about what is sweet and good and blessed in your life, and what you know of sin, destruction and despair.

Many of us are living in difficult, complicated circumstances. It can feel like survival of the fittest, making good grades in school, maintaining wealth in a down market, working towards renewed health and healing, scraping together enough resources to get through a year, a month, a week or just getting through a day.

Isaiah wants his people to know that God has the capacity to make it new. A new heaven and a new earth. Right here. What if instead of believing that we are facing calamity, what if we believed something deeply creative is taking place? Creativity can be messy. Sometimes some destruction happens along with the construction. Sometimes the process of change is hard to look at.

There will be no more weeping, children dying early in their lives, no longer someone losing their home or land. Isaiah ends with the beloved metaphor of the wolf and the lamb – the predator and the prey – feeding together. The most fierce animal Isaiah can think of, the lion, munches on straw like an ox. The snake no longer bites people or menaces their livestock, but its food is dust. It's a vision of new heavens and new earth, where no creature shall hurt or destroy on God's holy mountain.

I told you it is poetry. How do you make that real in a human life? It comes to life with imagination, creativity, and innovation. How is South Church being made new? Not just appreciating the past, but moving forward in faith?

One of my clergy colleagues, Rev Jane Willan recently wrote to her congregation about their stewardship campaign: *What does our church budget say to the world? Would an outsider read it as a delightful description of the hopes, dreams and aspirations of our congregation? Or would they see it as life-support? A desperate plea for making payroll, paying the light bill, and getting the parking lot plowed?*

If that is how you see the budget, then completing a pledge card must feel like an unwelcome chore. But what if you could view the budget as a divinely inspired opportunity? An opportunity to invest in the Kingdom of God on earth? Then the pledge card experience is quite different.

Jane is asking her congregation to invest in delight; in the kind of vision that Isaiah casts for his people. Invest in new beginnings, you don't need to be able to see all the way to the end, but sometimes making a step in the right direction is what we need to be on our way.

We believe in a God that is infinitely creative, even and especially when we are out of ideas; God has the capacity and the heart to create new.

Blessed is the one who reads the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near. (Rev. 1:3)

God is making a new beginning with us. Invest yourself. amen

Questions for reflection and dialogue:

- Think of a time when your outlook changed from hopeless to hopeful, what made the difference for you? How did that happen?
- When Isaiah 65:18 says: *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.* What, specifically, does that suggest that we do?

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