

23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Year C)

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*Isaiah 65:17-25*

*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 for ever  
in what I am creating;  
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,  
and its people as a delight.  
I will rejoice in Jerusalem,  
and delight in my people;  
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,  
or the cry of distress.  
No more shall there be in it  
an infant that lives but a few days,  
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;  
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,  
and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.  
They shall build houses and inhabit them;  
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.  
They shall not build and another inhabit;  
they shall not plant and another eat;  
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,  
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.  
They shall not labour in vain,  
or bear children for calamity;  
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—  
and their descendants as well.  
Before they call I will answer,  
while they are yet speaking I will hear.  
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.*

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Sometimes, the greatest act of faith is simply daring to dream of a future in which the trials and tribulations of the present come to an end. Sometimes, being a Christian in these tumultuous times means trusting in God's capacity to create something new in the midst of a suffering.

Today's passage from Isaiah comes to the Israelites in the immediate aftermath of the Babylonian captivity. The words of comfort in this poem are gifted to a community dealing with the post traumatic stress of their violent time under the rule of their Babylonian captors. It was a time of political upheaval and economic despair. The Israelites were struggling to piece their lives back together.

In the midst of this disorientation, the poet-prophet Isaiah dares to give the Israelites then - and us now - a vision of a healed world:

- A world where there is no weeping or grief...
- A world where infant mortality is no more...
- A world where all people live into ripe old ages...
- A world where houses are built and inhabited...
- A world where where the economy thrives and works for everyone...
- A world in which the work that people do is not done in vain...
- A world in which violence will be a thing of the past...

This passage speaks of issues such as infant mortality, access to healthcare, affordable housing, economic justice, and the end of violence. If these issues sound political, it's because they are. They are not partisan; but they most definitely are political. The prophet dares to dream us into a world in which we trust in - and take part in - God's capacity to create newness when we seem stuck in our own violent cycles of self-destruction.

To the people who think that they're stuck in such a terrible loop-de-loop, God speaks through the prophet saying:

*For I am about to create new heavens  
and a new earth;  
the former things shall not be remembered  
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But be glad and rejoice for ever  
in what I am creating;  
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,  
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I will rejoice in Jerusalem,  
and delight in my people;  
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,  
or the cry of distress.*

Jerusalem. Do you know what that word means? The first part of the word, Jeru, means “city.” The second part of the word, salem, comes from the Hebrew word “Shalom” meaning “peace.” So Jerusalem means the city of peace.

The poet-prophet calls us to follow God’s capacity for newness to create “cities of peace” wherever we are - whether that “city of peace” is called Jerusalem or Lexington, Kentucky. You and I are invited to participate in what Walter Brueggemann has called “prophetic imagination.” Simply put, prophetic imagination is the work of the church to imagine into existence a world that those in power say is impossible.

Brueggemann has said the following about the prophetic imagination of prophets such as Isaiah: *“The prophet engages in futuring fantasy. The prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined. The imagination must come before the implementation. Our culture is competent to implement almost anything and to imagine almost nothing. The same royal consciousness that make it possible to implement anything and everything is the one that shrinks imagination because imagination is a danger. Thus every totalitarian regime is frightened of the artist. It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one.”*<sup>1</sup>

Friends, I think prophetic imagination can also be described as such: it’s what happens when we take our faith public.

For example...

The powers that be said that black people were less than human and, therefore, suitable only to a life of slavery. And then Harriet Tubman practiced prophetic imagination and took her faith public, smuggling fellow slaves and bringing them to freedom in the north.

The powers that be said that Jews were also less than human and, therefore, deserved to be oppressed and slaughtered. And then Dietrich Bonhoeffer and other Christian pastors in Germany practiced prophetic imagination and took their faith public, preaching against the violence of Hitler and his Nazi regime and those that thought Nazism was compatible with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The powers that be said that women should learn their “rightful” place and, therefore, shouldn’t be able to vote. And then Susan B. Anthony practiced prophetic imagination and took her faith public, organizing folks to promote the women’s suffrage movement.

Friends, powerful things happen when we take our faith public. And practicing prophetic imagination can have real consequences for the community in which we live. This is not some far-off, abstract conversation. This is a conversation that can have real implications for people living right in our neighborhoods.

For examples, let’s look again at today’s passage from Isaiah and let us look at it through the lens of the theological Karl Barth who said that every Christian should have the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other...

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<sup>1</sup> Brueggemann, Walter. The Prophetic Imagination.

- Verse 19 says there will be no more weeping or cries of distress. How do we hold that text in one hand and the newspaper in the other that tells us that Kentucky is 5<sup>th</sup> in the nation for the number of deaths due to opioid overdoses?<sup>2</sup>
- Verse 20 envisions a day when all children are healthy. How do we hold that text in one hand and the newspaper in the other that tells us that nearly 1 out of 5 children in Kentucky are food insecure?<sup>3</sup>
- Verse 20 also dreams of a day when everyone lives into ripe, old ages. How do we hold that text in one hand and the newspaper in the other that tells us that Kentucky ranks as the 44<sup>th</sup> healthiest state in the country?
- Verse 21 seeks a world with affordable housing and economic growth. How do we hold that text in one hand and the newspaper in the other that tells us that 25% of Kentucky counties are on the list of the 100 most impoverished counties in the United States?<sup>4</sup>
- Finally, Verse 25 dreams of an end of violence. How do we hold that text in one hand and the newspaper in the other that tells us that we had yet another deadly school shooting this week, this time in the state of California?

Now is the time for prophetic imagination. Now is the time to take our faith public.

Now, as Jeff wisely reminded us in his sermon last week, a small church such as ours cannot tackle every social ill that affects our community.

However, what we *can* do, is to dream together. What we *can* do is to take our faith public and make sure that what we profess in here makes a difference “out there.” I’m reminded of the prophetic words of Martin Luther King, Jr. when he said the following: “We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.”

So, with that in mind, there’s at least two ways to interpret today’s passage from the poet-prophet Isaiah.

1. We can dismiss the prophet as an idealistic fool who teases us with an unrealistic list of unattainable goals.
2. Or, we can choose to exercise our prophetic imagination and take meaningful steps to bring God’s dream to reality by taking our faith public.

And let me tell you, the Resurrected Christ we worship chooses the second option and those of us who dare to follow him much choose likewise.

Because if we take God’s promise seriously - that promise of a new Jerusalem, a new “city of peace” - then we will see ourselves as vehicles of God’s love working together to make Lexington a city of peace for all peoples, not just ones who look like us, or act like us, or love like us, or vote like us, or speak like us.

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/data/statedeaths.html>

<sup>3</sup><https://www.wkyt.com/content/news/Kentucky-children--509310581.html>

<sup>4</sup><https://chfs.ky.gov/agencies/dail/Documents/2015ReportoftheInstituteForAging.pdf>

The people who are Beaumont Presbyterian Church, we are but a small part of God's plan gifted to us in Isaiah 65. A plan of a new heaven and a new earth. A plan where all babies are born healthy, people have plenty to eat, everyone can afford housing and healthcare, violence is a thing of the past, and everyone dies an old age having lived a life of joy and fulfillment. This is not a partisan conversation. It's a biblical one. And those of us that take the Bible seriously much place our cynicism aside and dare to dream into reality this vision of peace and prosperity for all peoples.

So, fellow disciples, let's take our faith public. Let us dream the dream of the poet-prophet Isaiah and do our part to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God's children, say: **Amen.**