

sermon-11/18/07 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Where Righteousness Is At Home”
Is. 65:17-25

One of my favorite Woody Allen quotes goes like this: “The lion and the calf shall lie down together but the calf won’t get much sleep.” Isn’t that the truth?! The vision of the future given to us by the prophet in chapter 65 and elsewhere in Isaiah (ch. 11) certainly is remarkable. And, if we are honest, it also seems a bit pie in the skyish. Some of the hopes seem so far out of our reach as to feel impossible to achieve in any literal way.

Certainly Isaiah’s words gave hope to the people in his day. This portion of the book of Isaiah was written around the time of the book of Haggai, which we read last week. The remnant had returned from exile and were facing daunting challenges. Many of them had previously experienced some of the situations Isaiah said were never going to happen again. They had been kicked out of their homes and others had moved in. They had planted crops only to have others eat the fruit of their labor.

So, too, we know about these things in our day. We know about poor infant mortality rates in other countries and increasingly in our own among minorities. We know about displaced people in Iraq and Palestine, refugees that have left their homes only to have them inhabited by others. This experience cuts close to home as well. Even our Seattle area saw many people of Japanese extraction lose their homes and businesses when they were sent to relocation camps during World War II.

We long for Isaiah’s vision of an idealized future to be realized in our broken and despairing world. I can relate to one commentator I read who said some of his friends have stopped watching the news. They have quit cold turkey because it was just depressing them too much. Who can stand it? We are subjected to a seemingly endless election process, questionable bank loans and a rocky stock market, home foreclosures, and ever more grim news in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq. And to top it off we have to listen to the petty squabbling in Congress as partisan politics rules the day. Why would anyone want to watch anymore?

But, are Isaiah’s seemingly unrealistic hopes any better than the cold, hard depressing facts the news brings into our homes and hearts on a daily basis? If we dismiss Isaiah’s hopeful words as just pie in the sky in the sweet bye and bye where can we turn for hope? Even if we don’t dismiss Isaiah, how can his vision of the peaceable kingdom be realized? What is our responsibility in making that happen?

Those are good, tough questions. Let’s start to answer them by looking at God’s responsibility in all of this. The prophet makes no bones about saying God is the one who will bring much of this vision into reality. God says the people are to rejoice in what God is creating, not what we create by our own efforts.

In the beginning God was the creator of the universe. But God is still creating throughout history. In fact, a more literal translation of the first verse in Genesis is, "In the beginning God began creating. . ." It is an ongoing process.

The creating work Isaiah describes is like a complete transformation, a resurrection even, of Jerusalem. That has to be God's work, not ours. Remember, God is in the resurrection business, not us.

What then is our responsibility in this resurrection? Usually resurrections follow a death. Our responsibility, then, has something to do with a death. What must die in us for God to transform us and our world? Isaiah says old memories must die. "The former things shall not be remembered or come to mind."

That is an intriguing notion. It is also a very challenging one. What must we forget for peace to break out in our world, in our homes, in our hearts? What must we forget for God's resurrecting power to be realized? Forgetting is almost impossible when we have been hurt by someone. Maybe a better goal might be to let go of those old memories that make it impossible for us to live in peace, impossible for us to allow God's grace to transform us and our world.

Certainly the Sunni's and the Shiite's will need to let go of some of their grudges in order for there to be peace in Iraq. So, too, Jews and Palestinians have a lot of letting go to do for peace in the Middle East to break out. The same can be said for Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, Democrats and Republicans in the U.S., and, as hard as it is for me to say this because it cuts pretty close to home, the Progressives and the Conservatives in our own PCUSA. Many of us have a good bit of letting go to do for peace to happen in our churches.

God may be the one to do the resurrections, but we all have a part to play in the death of old, painful memories and sleights that cause us to hold on to grudges and want to get some revenge.

The next step for us after letting go is to begin to live in the present as if the vision Isaiah paints is a reality now. We need to live in such a way in the present that violence will cease and enemies will live in harmony. We need to take steps that will slowly open up the future to the vision we have been given by God. Having a vision is absolutely critical if we want to move ahead in good ways.

We at Newport have a wonderful mission and vision statement. You can read it on our website if you have forgotten it. We have a group of people right now who are trying to see how we are living into that vision today and what staffing configuration we will need to better do that in the future. Vision statements give us a focus and drive the decisions we make in the present.

One commentator I read said one of the ways we do this is to "think globally and act locally." That was a popular phrase a few years ago. This commentator says Isaiah

“points to the theological truth of that phrase. On the one hand, the well-being of the world, cosmic shalom, does indeed rest on the intention of God for the wholeness of all creation. But, on the other, hope for the future also rests in part on the smaller, daily choices we make about how we will live together.”

We don't have to be giants in the faith to do our small part. Each time we live as if the vision Isaiah paints is a reality, we change our own hearts. Because we are interconnected, when we change, our world changes. When we live in such a way that “righteousness is at home” as the author of II Peter so beautifully put it (3:13), we enable God to continue creating the new earth in our little part of the world.

Whether the step we take is to let go of more of the wealth we have been given, or to let go of our anger at someone who has hurt us, or to let go of our need to always be right in any argument, each time we do that, we do our small part. As one commentator wrote, “Hope for the world is practiced in the trenches on a daily basis by ordinary folks like you and me. It is practiced against the circumstances of a world full of brokenness and the temptation to despair.”

So, be of good cheer. It is not up to us to transform the world. God is in the resurrection business, not us. We just need to allow ourselves to experience the little deaths that come with letting go. We just need to take the little steps today that make the glorious future vision we have been given more of a reality in our time. It is honorable work. Amen