

## **On Earth as It Is in Heaven**

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Isaiah 65: 17-25

This weekend was a tough one around our house. Between putting away summer clothes, pulling out the winter stuff, raking leaves, taking out the window screens and putting up the storm windows, and breaking down the 3-season porch. That one is always the worst. It isn't just the work of it, although stashing our summer wicker furniture up in the rafters of the garage is no easy task, but more than that. There is something deeply symbolic about it. Something final, something real that makes me a little sad. And it isn't that there isn't some good just around the corner. I actually love winter. I love snow, a warm fire and a late night cup of tea. I thoroughly enjoy advent and preparing for Christmas. Despite that fact that we haven't yet celebrated Thanksgiving yet, at least in our garden, summer's fruit and early fall's abundance have long since given way to limp vines and browning stalks.

Transitions are hard. Change, even positive change, can be difficult. Within the context of the Christian year, we are at a crossroads. The long season of Pentecost, with all of its Spirit, and celebration of the gifts of the Spirit is nearly over. In just two weeks the Christian calendar turns over once more, beginning again with advent, we prepare for the coming of the Christ child. But, of course, we aren't there yet. We are here, surrounded by the signs and symbols of summer's fading glory. And so, as the trees give up their vibrant colors and literally become shadows of their former selves, I can't help but feel like hope is getting ready to go under ground for a while.

And so, our reading from Isaiah comes at the perfect time of year. This is a good time for hoping, because in some ways there is little in our present that leads us to believe that new life will come again. Isaiah offers for us a vision of a kingdom, the possibility for a radically different way of being, of interacting. There are few passages in all of scripture that offer such a profound and detailed vision of God's kingdom. No more weeping. No more cries of distress. No more infants who live but a few days nor old people who do not live out a lifetime. Those

who build will enjoy what they've built, and those who plant will eat from the fruits of their labor. And it gets even better, if you can imagine it getting better than that. Before they call, I will answer, and while they are yet speaking, I will hear—this speaks to an even more intimate God, a God so close as to know our prayers before they're spoken. And then it gets even better, this is where the vision of God's kingdom gets really radical—the wolf and the lamb will feed together, the lion eat straw like an ox. They will not hurt or destroy on all God's holy mountain. A total and complete ending to violence. The weaker will no longer live in fear of the stronger. Natural instincts of self preservation will be put aside, as God provides a way of living for each and every part of creation. It is a vision that sounds familiar, doesn't it? It sounds a lot like those descriptions of the Garden of Eden in the first few chapters of Genesis.

What makes this text even all the more remarkable is the time it was written. This portion of the book of Isaiah was written nearly five hundred years before Jesus. The people of Israel have been back in their homeland for several generations after the Babylonian exile, which Mike talked about last week. Even two or three generations later, the people still see the effects of the conquest all around them. The temple is but a shadow of its former self, rebuilt, but not really. Hope is tough to come by for the people who believe that God is with them. The people wonder if God will indeed keep promises. And so God reminds the people of their relationship, and offers them a vision of what will be.

But makes this text so wonderful, so beautiful, is the very same thing that makes it difficult for us to hear. Because it is so far from where we are. One of the reasons I love reading scripture is because of its ability to speak across time. We hear this text with the same ears that heard it some 2500 year ago. Post-exilic Israel, looking around for a sign of God's blessing must have felt out of control and overwhelmed. They worried about their children's lives and whether or not a brighter day was hiding somewhere just beyond the horizon. And it is in just such desperate circumstances, just when all seems lost, that God speaks and moves and says, "wait, don't give up, I'm not done yet. *We* are not done yet." When we slip into despair and lament, it is there we find that God's promises have meaning, it is there that hope can find ground in which to grow. Renewal is coming, rebirth is just around the corner, caring and healing are yet still possible. We must not give up on God, because God has most certainly not

given up on us. It is in times of difficulty and struggle that God's song of hope finds words and in our lives those words find meaning.

Christians are at our core, a people of hope. The gospel beseeches us to look beyond what is and see what might be. And I'm not talking about a theology of the afterlife, for if we only understand God's kingdom as that which we come to live in once we die, then we have missed the central message of Jesus' ministry. Jesus did not preach a pie-in-the-sky theology. He preaches and teaches and lives the truth that God's future is now, that our future is now. Immediately following his baptism Jesus begins to preach that kingdom of God is at hand. In Luke's gospel, the first thing Jesus does after his baptism is teach in the synagogue, and what scroll does he read from?—Isaiah, saying that he has come to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. This scripture is fulfilled in your hearing, he says. Jesus healed people—today. Jesus fed people today. Jesus found the poor and the outcast, the lost, the sick, the heartbroken and said to them, I have come that you might have life, and have it in abundance—today. Not somewhere down the road. Not after you die. But here and now, in this life. Today.

Our world teaches us that power prevails and that survival is for the fittest, but the gospel offers a new vision and we know there must be another way. I believe that another way is possible of living and relating to one another. Don't you believe that another way is possible? One of the reasons I enjoy reading scripture is that the Bible dreams big. This vision which Isaiah lays before us is so much more than putting a slick new coat of paint on an old worn out way of being. That's what makes it so scary and so exciting. We are talking about starting over. We are talking about a clean slate. We are talking about doing it right, not just tinkering around the edges, but a wholesale new creation. And while it is God's vision, and ultimately it will be with God and through God, and because of God we will get to this new way, we are the people—we are the people--called upon to participate in God's project of re-creation.

We are in a time of transition, no doubt about it—globally, culturally, ecologically, and even here as a church. In each of these contexts we know enough to know that the old ways will not work anymore, even if we don't yet know what will work. But even in the midst of so

much uncertainty and change, even in the midst of difficulty and loss, there is so much for which we are thankful. And hope is not least among them.