

A New Earth

Luke 24:1-12

by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
First Central Congregational UCC
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Isaiah 65 is “a glorious artistic achievement” declares the great bible scholar Walter Brueggemann. He continues, “It is also an act of daring . . . faith that refuses to be curbed by present circumstances. This poet . . . knows that [God’s] coming newness is not contained within our present notions of the possible.” In other words, the poet believes that the world can change, that the status quo is not the way things must always be.

This poem from Isaiah 65 is part of the section of the Book of Isaiah which scholars believe comes from the period after the Jews have returned to Judea from their exile in Babylon, when they have begun rebuilding the country. The poet was writing during a period when the city of Jerusalem was being rebuilt and the people were striving to create a just society. The poet knows that the previous effort at nationhood had been unjust, exploiting the poor and defying the righteousness of God. The poet imagines Jerusalem reborn as a city of peace and justice, true to its name.

One is caught up when the poet mentions infant mortality. Now, I don’t know about you, but I don’t read a lot of poems about infant mortality. If it comes up at all in my reading, infant mortality appears in some statistical analysis, like some World Health Organization report comparing the health systems of various societies. Not the stuff of poetry. But Isaiah 65 rhapsodizes about infant mortality and life expectancy. This discussion of infant mortality and life expectancy is a sign that the poet isn’t just interested in beautiful words and wonderful images, he is dealing with practical issues of actual social relationships. Measurable qualities of how well a society is doing. The poet is actually describing what a peaceful city looks like!

In order to achieve the measurable goals of low infant mortality and high life expectancy, a peaceful city will be stable, it will not be engaged in violence, and it will have developed an infrastructure that promotes the quality of life of its inhabitants. A caring community will rid itself of neglect, malnutrition, and bad medical service.

The poet advocates for economic stability and respecting property and labor. The peaceful city in which God reigns is one where government does not burden your labor, but it is also a society that agrees to provide access to health care in order to care for the least of us. We should take note here. If America wants to find a middle ground in our on-going political debates, a way to end the uncivil rhetoric, then we could begin by reading Isaiah 65.

The poem reminds us of a promise in the Book of Genesis, where children and descendants are seen as a sign of blessing from God. Children are always the most at-risk members of a society, so a society that cares deeply for children and works to ensure that their life will be one of blessing, is a good, a just, and a peaceful society.

The poet actually believes that all of this great social change is possible. It is possible because God is at work, restoring not only Jerusalem, but the entire cosmos. “For I am about to

create new heavens and a new earth," God proclaims, "Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating." All of creation will experience the change God intends. "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox . . . They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain."

The lion shall eat straw, huh? Pastor Chuck Warnock asks the provocative question, "How do you feed straw to lions?" The answer, "The only way . . . is if everything we know has changed – if the world as we know it is not the same."

And this is the poet's vision. Everything can change. The way the world is is not the way it has to be.

But I wonder, can we take the poet's vision seriously? Can we believe its promise? The very history of the city of Jerusalem casts doubt upon what the poet has written.

In his book *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*, Amin Maalouf records the repeated conquests of Jerusalem by Christians and Muslims during the Crusades. Each group was intent on possessing the holy city for themselves. Some of the conquerors and rulers were more enlightened than others, particularly the Kurdish-Muslim Saladin who allowed Christians and Jews to live peacefully in the city and allowed pilgrims to visit. But one reads painfully of the various atrocities committed in the name of religion.

Of course, Jerusalem remains in the news. Israelis and Palestinians continue to fight over its neighborhoods. Twenty-seven centuries after this Isaianic vision of a Jerusalem where "no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress," we are still fighting over this city named for peace.

So, can we believe the poet's promises? Can we believe in a new heavens and a new earth where justice and peace shall reign?

This poem from the Book of Isaiah is offered to us as a reading on Easter Sunday, when we proclaim that Christ is risen and that God's work of creating a new heavens and a new earth has moved closer to reality. But your experience of the world might leave you wondering if all of this is just escapist fantasy, the "opiate of the masses" as Karl Marx called it. Or is there something deeply powerful for us to believe on this day? Something that can save us?

For we are in need of salvation. We have not achieved the peace and justice of the poet's vision. We have not renewed the earth, learning to live in sustainable relationships with all of God's creation. We ourselves may still be awaiting transformation to our best selves.

We must realize that our suffering and the injustices that oppress us have blinded us. Our understanding has been deformed by the status quo. We accept that the world is the way it is and do not believe that it can be radically different.

Yes, we enjoy the poetry of Isaiah, but "It's only an ideal," we think. "Something to aspire to, of course, but something that can never be." We wonder if Jesus' death was any kind of victory at all, for we look around us and see that the forces of evil continue to thrive and that the oppressive logic of the empire infiltrated the Christian church. Rather than the hopeful words from the Gospel of John, spoken by Jesus before he dies, "It is finished," theologian Wendy Farley writes of the "ongoing crucifixion of the world."

Yes, we are in need of salvation. Where can we find it?

I believe that the glory of God revealed in this story of the death and resurrection of

Jesus can save us from our suffering, cure our blindness, and heal our brokenness. Listen to these words from Wendy Farley:

The passion of the Beloved [Jesus] displays the intimacy of the Divine with our suffering. There is light in what we experience as the darkest hell. There is opposition to the prevarications and injustices of history. This is an indelible aspect of reality. . . . Christ's incarnation in ministry, passion, and resurrection is a light that "shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

The story of Jesus reveals to us an alternative reality. It reveals that the tyranny of our suffering is not the way things have to be. There is another power. Even this simple revelation, like a candle being lit in a darkened room, has profound consequences.

She continues:

Whether we find our way out of hell sooner or later, whether we do so through Christian faith or in some other way. . . . Whether any particular struggle is successful, whether our leaders are murdered or betrayed, the very act of demanding justice defrauds "the ruler of this world" of total mastery. It is a witness that another truth animates humanity and our history.

The popular author Brian McLaren has written that the most radical thing that we can do is to believe. To believe in a different kind of story than our current status quo. To believe something like the vision of Isaiah or the Easter story – the present isn't the way things have to be; there can be a new heaven and a new earth.

The reason that simply believing is the most radical thing we can do is because the only power which the status quo has is because we believe it. Things are the way they are because we believe them to be the way things will always be. In response, Jesus promises us that we will be saved if we simply believe, and this is why. Because when we believe that the reign of God is possible, then we rob those other unjust and oppressive stories of their power, and we take the first step to making Easter true in our own lives.

I've seen this personally. One of the joys of my ministry has been to see the resurrection moments that occur when a gay or lesbian person comes out of the closet after many years of hiding in the darkness. To watch someone, particularly someone older, emerge from shame and guilt into the joy and wholeness of their God-given identity, is like watching a new life being born. Simply believing that they can live honestly brings about an entire transformation. There is much to learn from these resurrection stories in our midst.

How can believing bring about our salvation? Theologian Delores Williams writes that the salvation offered by God through Jesus is a "new vision to see the resources for positive, abundant relational life." Brian McLaren adds that because of Jesus we begin to see ourselves in a new light, "not armed with an ideology but infused with a new imagination." Wendy Farley describes our casting off that which obscures the divine beauty within us and instead recognizing that we are "luminous with divine beauty."

The saving power of Isaiah's vision and of the Easter story is that they awaken us to the truth about ourselves -- we are filled with holy light. If we awaken to that truth, then our

present circumstances can change, we can cast off that which binds us in darkness and be transformed. And when we are individually transformed, it is just possible that we will bring others along with us. And as more join in the movement, human society will change. And -- dare we also believe -- all of creation.

The poet writes: "The former things shall not be remembered or come to mind," I say "Amen" to that! "But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating!" Easter is a chance for us to reflect – Do I believe that the world can be a better place? Or am I going to succumb to the cynicism and the despair that it cannot?

Brian McLaren writes,

If we believe, we can be transformed into agents of something beautiful.

This Easter, be beautiful.