

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

Are We There Yet?

Sermon Reflection Notes

We've had several weeks of worship where the lectionary texts have been focused on lament, sadness, exile, and generational curses. This week's listed Gospel lesson from Luke 21 would have been more of the same; Jesus shares these words: 'Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.' As Pastor Mary Beth pointed out, it doesn't sound like a lot of "Good News" there. As a result, Pastor Mary Beth chose the Old Testament lesson from the lectionary as the focus for the sermon this week. This text from Isaiah is written in poetic form which is an important feature when seeking understanding. Not only was this text written in the late 6th century (*admittedly a very, very long time ago*) but it is also formed in a tradition that is radically different than the current times. We live in a time of order, of science, of seeking to understand and finding answers, of deciphering to master and control. We have information at our fingertips, and we become easily frustrated when answers are not immediately available. That type of access to information would have been unheard of for the writer of these verses. But what was not unheard of, what we perhaps have lost in our information age, is the prophetic hope offered in this text, the dreams and visions of a new heaven and a new earth that go beyond our understanding and imagination. This text offers a glimpse of the original hope offered in Genesis, a glimpse of wonder and beauty, life and abundance. However, it does beg a few questions, perhaps the biggest one being "Are We There Yet?" Shouldn't the new heaven and new earth have appeared by now?

Pastor Mary Beth acknowledged the difficulty in waiting, waiting for a new world free of war and conflict, pain and suffering. She also re-directed our attention to the 'in-between' time, where events are thrust upon us and we don't get to decide when they happen. Sometimes those events are difficult, heartbreaking, even catastrophic. But sometimes, those events are anticipated and hoped for like the text from Isaiah. This text, written after the return of the exiles to rebuild Jerusalem, still reflects the need for hope. The people were no longer exiled, but life was not 'back to normal.' They were in-between.

The people of God have always known that God's Word and God's power for new life is loose in the world. The people of God have always trusted in God's capacity to bring life out of death, well-being out of trouble, and joy out of tribulation. But in our knowing, we have not always known how to respond to God's gifts. We have not always known how to live differently because of God's good news among us. Which is why we have prophetic poets to remind us that our need to order should not drive out our need for hope. It is outrageous to think about the new world of God's creation; it is so far beyond even our imagination we don't know how to hold on to it. Poetry, like that found in the text for this week, pushes us away from what is and into what will be. It pushes us into the world as created by God. It reminds us again that no power will thwart the fulfillment of God's righteousness and hope is a defiant affirmation of that truth.

So we work where we are. We do what we can with what we have. We wait and work in the 'in-between' time, trusting that God is still creating, still speaking, still making all things new. We are not there yet, but we are also not where we were. Let us continue to hear the dreams of prophets of old that show us the hope promised by the One who never leaves us alone.

Scripture

Isaiah 65: 27-35 (NRSVUE)

¹⁷For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.
¹⁸But 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.
¹⁹I 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.
²⁰No more shall there be in it
an infant who 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.
²¹They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
²²They 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.
²³They shall not labor in vain
or bear children for calamity,
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—
and their descendants as well.
²⁴Before they call I will answer,
while they are yet speaking I will hear.
²⁵The 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.

Discussion Questions

1. The imagery of creation and of a world where all is what God dreams for is found in the poetry of *Isaiah 65:17-25*. Where else in the Bible can that kind of imagery and poetry be found?
2. In our own words, what is God's promise? In the words of the Biblical text, what is God's promise?
3. What is the role of poetry in life? Do you have favorite poets? Why or why not?
4. Why are poets among the first to be silenced in the face of oppression? How does poetry elicit hope?
5. What are we called to do in the 'in-between' time while we wait? What responsibilities do we have as children of God? What might we need to learn, un-learn, or re-learn?

Closing Prayer

O God, you are the One who, in the midst of exile and oppression, spoke your amazing Word of new life. You spoke of homecoming, you spoke of a time when all would have what is needed for life, you spoke of a place where all are welcome and named to be your beloved daughters and sons.

You continue to speak that Word of a new creation, even to us. But all too often we hear your Word as outrageous - beyond our capacity and imagination to believe. We see the injustice and grief and terror around us, and we hear your Word as poetic fantasy.

But we want to hear. We want to believe that your shalom will be set loose in the world. We want to do the daily work of speaking your Word of newness to each other. We want to do the work of confronting injustice. We want to know that the small steps we take each day will be caught up in your creative goodness until your kingdom comes on earth, even as it is in heaven. We pray in the name of Jesus, who showed us the way. Amen.

"Believe in the promises of God."