

Isaiah 65:17-25

A New World

I am grateful for the time off last week, and glad that David Harris could serve in my place. I trust all went well. I had the opportunity to visit my sons and my dad, and also my sister, as well as visiting a place or two I had never been before and some places I haven't been in a long time.

I went to a place called Tom Sauk Mountain, which is the highest mountain in the state of Missouri at the towering height of about 1770 feet above sea level. My parents used to take us there when we were young to see the fall color and hike down the back side of the mountain to a beautiful rugged waterfall called Minasauk Falls and then on to a rock formation called the "Devil's Tollgate because on the old pioneer wagon trail, the wagons had a difficult time needling through the giant rocks.

It was all still there as before but the trail has changed. As a child the trail took a path down the hill that led through a forest in which there was an old school bus completely surrounded by thick woods so that it was hard to imagine how it got there. My sister asked me about it when I got to her house. The new trail takes a different path so that one can not see what has become of the remains of that old bus.

New Houses

My sister has just moved and was very interested in one of the trends in St. Louis County, a trend also that is present in Kirkwood where my dad and Jackie live. One by one, the older houses are being torn down and new houses are being built in their place. Rather than moving into new neighborhoods, people are buying lots in older communities that already have houses on them, houses from the 1950s and 60s, and they are tearing them down to build new ones. Imagine buying a house, that is the way we would put it; we usually don't say that we bought a lot with a house on it, and then tearing it down to build another, literally buying two houses and getting only one. The rising of new forests and homes.

Israel

The story of the bible is the story of the rise and fall of Israel. The people who wrote what we call the Old Testament, at least in the form we have it now, knew the ending, and struggled with the implications of being conquered. Let that settle in! The people who gave us, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," knew how the story ended with the Babylonian Captivity and the destruction of the Holy City with its temple. They speak to us not of the fear of being destroyed, but from the fact of being destroyed. Their

conviction is that their plight was not the end, instead it was a new beginning. And, very remarkably, they came to believe that God used, not willed, but made use of their hardship to bring faith to a larger world, to bring more people into God's family.

Even so

Even so, the better world that came after the destruction of the Kingdom of Israel, was only temporary, and it has been replaced many times since, as it is in the process of being replaced again. It is the story of the human race. There is always a sadness that goes along with the loss of the old, and with the realization that all our new beginnings are destined to become old and go away. When we see change, it is always this way; it wipes out the old, we are saddened, then it creates something new and we are awakened by enthusiasm; our anxiety is replaced by a rush of adrenaline only to be saddened again by the recurring cycle we don't seem able to escape. The prophets tell of one such cycle in excruciating detail, not politely, passing over the indecencies of it all, neither their own or those of their conquerors. The Bible is not for the squeamish. And they interpret it for us all.

The ones who lived through this ancient trauma were not really being prophetic when they broke the news that the tragedy they most feared and grieved turned

out not to be the end and the changes they feared turned out not to be as bad as they had thought. They were most prophetic when they dreamed their cosmic dream of a permanent New Heaven and a New Earth. Some have called the Book of Isaiah the first New Testament book.

“Behold I will create a New Heaven and a New Earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more.”

We have inherited this promise. To us the delay of it is problematic because for us 2500 years is such a long time. But in the great scheme of things it is only a blip, and not a very large blip at that.

Isaiah's vision is beautiful; of people living long into their old age and of no infant mortality; of people benefiting from their own work instead of laboring for others and of remarkable peace between enemies and mostly proximity, the feeling of God being far away giving way to presence; the wolf and the lamb feeding together; and no more harm.

This dream of a new world has not yet come true even though sometimes we let ourselves believe that it is almost here, at least. The trouble in the world and in our lives stands in stark contrast to the hopefulness of this dream. What can we say without dismissing it as so much wishful thinking?

Things to Say

I have sometimes wondered what it would have been like to stand before a congregation the Sunday after a cultural event like Pearl harbor or the assassination of a president. I actually did this after 9/11 and it didn't seem like there was much impact. This political season seems like such a time, only maybe less so. Quite frankly, it was disturbing. What concerns me most is the dividedness between Christians. Like Isaiah who thought Israel was to be a priest to the nations, I believe the church is meant not to be a part of the divisions, but a community that rises above them so that everyone can be blessed. We are not doing a very good job of it. Like Israel, we resist this vision.

It is because Isaiah's dream that we remain hopeful, daring to love our opponents, trusting God for our future and well-being, grieving the dividedness between us.

Beyond the concern over the election, we turn to our everyday lives which often cause us to be inwardly divided. Let the hopefulness of this dream sink into the center of your being, trusting in the God who inspired and gave it to a people more strained and anxious than we are.

In faith, strive to do good. Live peaceably with your neighbors. Dare to love. Forgive. Look for the good in people. Celebrate life and nurture it. Always remember that Christ is making everything new.

The answer is that the bus got there before there was a forest, which was planted by the CCC in the time they called the Great Depression. In those troubled times a new forest was planted. New houses are being built in the middle of old neighborhoods. Take heart because each old thing destroyed and each new thing built foretells of the great promise of which Isaiah spoke, for which we long, about which we dream; which is our salvation and our peace.

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