

Isaiah 65:17-25

In That Day . . . Hope

November 17, 2019

It is traditional for the last two Sundays of the liturgical year to focus the attention of the church on the things of the End, Eschatology is what theologians call it.

Our lives are filled as much with endings as they are with beginnings:

There is the beginning of the year in January and the end of the year in December, or in this case, the beginning of the liturgical year with Advent, and the end with prophecy and Thanksgiving.

There is the beginning of the school year in August and its end in May, or the beginning of the baseball season in April and its end in October (or football in August and its end in January, or so).

Some of our journeys take longer, the beginning of formal education at pre-school, sometimes not ending until the end of graduate school maybe 25 years later. And after education, whatever level that involves, there is the beginning of a career and its end in retirement.

And of course, there is birth, the beginning of life, and death, its end. Some refer to these as life's passages, or the stages one lives in the course of a life.

The Past

What shall we say about how to cope with these passages? One temptation is to look to the past; some try to recover it; some to re-live it, some had negative memories of it and seek to escape it. It is possible that in order to be a healthy and well-adjusted person, one might need to engage it, trying to size it up so that it can be allowed its positive influences without harming a person with its negatives.

The prophets of Israel insisted that it be spoken and that the truth is told about it. Sometimes that truth is hard. One thinks of King David, Israel's great King, who is presented as so much more than just the ideal king, but the ideal person. He was authentic and successful, a military leader, a talented musician and poet, a renaissance man of sorts.

But he was also presented as a successful penitent, confessing his sins in sackcloth and ashes, mourning the loss of innocence and accepting punishment *and* restoration. Now this has been brought to my attention by Kathleen O'Connor. But in order to present David as an example of repentance, the truth about his sinfulness had to be told.

In the end, Israel's story ends badly, with the destruction of the great city and its temple, and exile. The prophets all tell out that story and insist that responsibility be taken, by everyone, even though the idea of punishment for sin is not the last word. When

we seek the treasured past, most of us end up having to admit that our memory of it tends to diminish the influence of the tragedies.

The past is not all that it is cracked up to be. Even for those whose harmful experiences never recede, the past is less significant than we assume. That is part of the truth of the biblical message. The prophets forced Israel to reckon with its past, and it forces us to reckon with ours. The other truth about the gospels is that it sets us looking forward; the prophets had a vision of the future too.

The Future

People like me have been inspired by this beautiful vision, and in Isaiah we find some of the most beautiful images in human language. They even sound good in English:

“See, I will create a new heavens and a new earth.
The former things will not be remembered,
nor will they come to mind. . .
The sound of weeping and of crying
will be heard in it no more.
Never again will there be in it
an infant who lives but a few days,
or an old man who does not live out his years . . .
They will build houses and dwell in them;
they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
No longer will they build houses and others live in
them . . .

My chosen ones will long enjoy the work of their hands. They will not labor in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the Lord, they and their descendants with them. . .

The wolf and the lamb will feed together . . .
They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,” says the Lord.

What a vision? There will be justice, there will be rest and peace, joy and love. Isaiah insisted, like the others, that before we get to that paradise, we must reckon honestly with our past, and deal responsibly with our present.

Beginnings and Endings

It is in the context of our earthly beginnings and endings that we catch this beautiful vision of a new heavens and new earth. We live through the passages, experience sorrow and pain, and serendipitous joy and the surprise of grace and through these sacred life experiences, we come to accept the prophetic vision of a future that compels us forward, even when time seems to be hurtling through space willy-nilly with no mooring to hang on to for the ride.

The gospel story has been fashioned by the church into an annual cycle; birth, death, life in the spirit, the liturgical calendar, so that we can have such a mooring. Our lives begin spontaneously and without our permission, and we are not allowed input into the particulars. The end comes almost just as

spontaneously, and many of the experiences along the way are hard.

There is a famous country music song written by someone named John Prine (about whom I know nothing), entitled, “Angel from Montgomery,” and that has been recorded by almost everyone, most notably Bonnie Raitt, I think. The song has a pithy little line in it that seems to fit;

“To believe in this living, is such a hard way to go.”

And it is.

But it is much more than that. Life has a wonderful unspeakably beautiful quality to it that lifts us up, leaving us trying to find a way to express the wonder of it. We use words like love and beauty and joy and and in the psalms we find images like, “all the trees of the field clapping their hands,” trying to express the bible’s message that the goodness and wonder of life are victorious, that they are better than life’s hardness is bad.

And it is important to understand that this message of the victory of goodness is given to us from people who have seen the worst, they have known life’s worst experiences intimately. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and all the rest had foreseen the great catastrophe and railed against the people and against God even, blaming everyone, but in the end they rejoiced because they were alive and God was with them.

Perhaps they are best seen as fellow travelers, expressing for us what we don’t have the courage, or the creative ability to express, putting words to the inexpressible things. By doing so they help us journey through the hard things until we ourselves break forth in praise at the wondrous beauty of life, and they give us words for that too.

They say things no one would dare to say, even though we sometimes think them, and our faith comes alive, even when we face life’s worst and hardest challenges. We are inspired by their faith, their honesty, their creative giftedness. And we are so convinced of their interpretation of life that in the end we can only conclude that their words are from God.

The word for what they point us to, the new thing they call us to face without fear, is hope. They have given us a great hope, and that is the end of things.

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