

CAN WE BUILD A NEW JERUSALEM?

TEXT: Isaiah 65:17-25 and Luke 21:5-19

What beautiful words we just heard from the Prophet Isaiah. God speaks through the prophet and provides a vision for a new future, one which will be much more expansive than anything that the people of God could ever imagine. It is an invitation into life as God's holy people, living in the new Jerusalem. The old life will be shed as we are invited into new life, the contrast of which is beyond human comprehension.

He illustrates this with some statistics. The scale between the old and the new is so vast that Isaiah has to put it into context. It is only in the last one-hundred years that infant mortality has dropped to levels in which the death of a child under five becomes an unusual occurrence. In the United States six children in 1000 will die before they reach the age of five. Until 1750 that number was around 500, and even by 1900 there were still over 200 deaths in 1000 children. If you think about it, the numbers are absolutely staggering and every single family faced death. It was estimated in the early Roman period that each woman would need to give birth to ten children just to keep the population of a city stable.

Susanna Wesley, the mother of John and Charles Wesley, gave birth to nineteen children, nine of whom died in infancy. At the time of her death, only eight of her children were alive. The pain of burying children must have broken the hearts of many a parent. This is suffering on a scale which we would find difficult to imagine in our day.

At the same time, we are beginning to take long life for granted. Actuaries now tell us that the one who will live to 150 has probably already been born. This is a huge shift from the past. Until 1900 the average life expectancy barely reached over thirty. This was in large part due to the high infant mortality rate. If a person made it to the age of fifteen, he just might make it to the ripe old age of fifty.

The prophet was trying to make a point about the vast scale of God's promise that there would be no infants who would die. One would only be a teenager at the age of 100. The promise of the new Jerusalem was not just about the rebuilding of an ancient city; it was the foreshadowing of the kingdom of God. We are invited into our cultural context in which we see the vast scale of contrast when it comes to life in the new Jerusalem. The promise of new life is one of radical transformation, the scale of which may seem incomprehensible to us.

Now we turn to our reading from the Gospel of Luke. Where Isaiah is bringing the promise of better things to come, the writer of Luke gives us a warning that there will be tribulation ahead. But he offers us an invitation to live *now* by faith and hope, inviting the prospect of future tribulation and trial only to keep us aware of what God has created and given to us as a gift.

While Isaiah brings God's message that God is creating Jerusalem as a place of rejoicing and a people of joy, Luke declares that the temple, the centerpiece of Jewish religious life, will be thrown down, and that there will not be one stone upon another. And, contrary to all those who predict that the end of the world as we know it, the so-called *rapture*, and the onset of the apocalypse, will come at some specific date and time in the not-so-distant future, Jesus counsels believers not only *not* to be alarmed but also *not* to plan for those days. Instead, he invites us to a living and active trust so that we may believe, first, that the various trials that come are actually opportunities to witness, and, second, that Jesus will equip us to speak and respond when such occasions arise. And, at other places in the gospels, Jesus is even more explicit, saying that, "no one knows the day or hour" when these things occur, or when Jesus will return.

So, what can we say about a new Jerusalem? The promise of something better to come is still a dream for disciples today. The promise of the new Jerusalem was not just about the rebuilding of an ancient city but it was the foreshadowing of the kingdom of God. The new Jerusalem exists today, not in the Middle-East, but in the already of the

kingdom of God. Therefore, the promises of Isaiah are for us already today. So, we ask ourselves, “What remains beyond our comprehension in scale today?”

For us it has been momentous years for our nation. We are a nation that is deeply divided. The institution we rely on, our government, seems fragile and threatened. Can it endure when there are such deep divisions? But we have witnessed first-hand that governments, like buildings, do not last forever. Jesus knew that our human institutions, important as they are, don't last forever. Countries and kingdoms and empires come and go. We see this in our gospel story today. When Jesus and his disciples arrived at the big city of Jerusalem they saw the magnificent temple. The disciples were in awe. They had never seen anything like it. King Herod the Great had built it in order to make a name for himself. By the time of Jesus, it had been under construction for 50 years and would take another 20 years to complete. The temple was built with imported white marble and gleamed in the sun. No wonder the disciples were impressed! But not Jesus. “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another, all will be thrown down”. Standing there in front of the temple it was hard to imagine. But Jesus was right. He foresaw the future destruction of the temple. When the Jewish nation revolted, the Romans came in and destroyed the city and the temple in 70 AD. Not one stone was left upon another. In fact, the only part of that temple that remains today is the Western Wailing Wall.

I think there are a couple of lessons we can take from today's readings. The first is that Jesus knows the future. We may not know the future, but Jesus does. When his disciples thought about the future they were anxious and afraid. “Teacher, when will this be and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” And Jesus told them not to be terrified. “Not a hair on your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls” he told them. What do you feel when you think about the future? Are you worried, unsettled, uneasy, fearful? Jesus says to us today the same thing he said to his disciples – fear not. I know the future and I will be there with you in that future.

There is another lesson to be learned here. Something more important than country and constitution exists. As Christians our loyalties are first and foremost to God and God's kingdom. That is, after, all, the first commandment. You shall have no other gods. As Christians we participate as citizens of our country. We love our country. We are willing to defend it and sacrifice for it. We saw that demonstrated last week – Veterans day, and the sacrifices made by so many veterans. But, as much as we love our country, as Christians we realize that there is something even more important than country, and that is our love for God and God's kingdom. Countries come and they go, but God's kingdom lasts forever. This is where Jesus wants us to anchor our hope and trust. This is where we find our values and our commitments to peace and justice. This is where we find the courage to work to change a system that ignores the weak or oppresses the minority, where we find to courage to lift our voice on behalf of the poor and victims of injustice.

As Jesus described the future, I think he had Psalm 46 in mind. “The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. The lord of hosts is with us. He makes the wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear”. “Be still, and know that I am God! The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. When institutions that we depend on fail us, we need to pause and take a deep breath. We need to be still and remember who is God. God says to us, “Be still (*take a deep breath*) and know that I am God”. I am exalted over all the nations. I am with you. I am your true refuge.

In times of uncertainty and change, we need to take a deep breath, turn to God, to be reminded of God's love for us in Jesus Christ, to be reminded that our lives and our futures are in God's hands, to remind ourselves that the New Jerusalem is here and now. This is when we recommit ourselves to God's kingdom and pledge our ultimate allegiance to God's values and seek to walk in the way of Jesus. Amen.