

Be Glad and Rejoice!

Isaiah 65:17-25

¹⁷ For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.

¹⁸ But 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.

¹⁹ I 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.

²⁰ No more shall there be in it an infant that 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.

²¹ They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

²² They 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.

²³ They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD—and their descendants as well.

²⁴ Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear.

²⁵ The 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.

You know that I spent some quality time with my older brother and sisters last week. We spent a great deal of time talking about the past; the heritage of our grandparents on both our mother's and our father's sides. As I listened, I took a great deal of pride in our ancestry and what they were able to accomplish in the years since they were liberated from slavery. My mother's father learned to read was able to become a land owner. Her mother taught school for a time. My father's father left a legacy of four beautiful daughters and one son and my cousins and siblings have been able to contribute to their communities as business owners, educators, social workers, religious leaders and even a well-known doctor. As proud as I am of my physical heritage, I am even more grateful for the Christian heritage they gave us! In our scripture, the writer

was concerned about the new things that God was about to do for God's people. The writer asked: What are the capacities of God? In our mystery-stripped world, we tend to focus on human capacities. Isaiah lifts our eyes and hearts to contemplate the capacities of God.

God has the capacity to create. Well, we know that; however, Isaiah reminds us that God creates on an unimaginable scale—new heavens and a new earth. In other words, there is nothing in all of creation, or in all that we imagine beyond creation, that is beyond the capacity of God to change. For people mired in regret or loss or sin, and for people ground down by oppression and the pain of living in bondage, this is a message of hope! Nothing is final; everything is up for grabs in the mystery of the creative capacity of God.

At the heart of our Christian faith is this Creator, our God, who emerges even in the bleakest hour of human history to create anew. No wonder these words of Isaiah are remembered and beloved by individuals and communities of faith in all seasons of the human journey. No matter what the circumstance, our witness is that God has the capacity to create new heavens and a new earth.

Not only will there be new creation, but the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. Many of us puzzle as to the wisdom of forgetting even the most painful episodes of life. As the saying goes, those who forget history are doomed to repeat it. So, why would God offer to erase memories that may in fact save us from repeating terrible mistakes?

A newly ordained person was troubled by her occasional forgetfulness of the issues that members brought to her. She could not remember the congregational quarrels and gossip that people described to her, nor did she remember the specific content of some heartrending pastoral sessions and confessions. An experienced pastor suggested to her that perhaps some forgetfulness is a gift from God. Perhaps there is such a thing as "holy amnesia." Isaiah's vision offers holy amnesia as a gift from God. Perhaps some memories are best lost, so that we can begin anew. Maybe intentional, prayerful

forgetting is the kind of creative stuff from which God's gifts of healing and forgiveness can emerge!

Although we can certainly find personal solace and hope in the power of this passage; but, as in so many of Isaiah's words, the focus is on communal salvation and new life. Isaiah is not talking about good fortune coming to a person here or a family there. God's joy is in creating the new and beautiful city, and this holy joy will be reflected in the lives of all people. Jerusalem, in this scripture also stands in for all human communities everywhere, even—and maybe especially—those who have turned away from God, love of neighbor, and justice for everyone.

Isaiah is writing to a community that has turned away from God and for whom the consequences of unfaithfulness are real, even unto exile. Yet even the deserved consequences of exile and ruin for the city are finally going to be swept up in the holy surge toward joy for God and for the people of God. In spite of Israel's unfaithfulness, Isaiah declares that God will rejoice and delight in God's people and in the holy and ruined city. Human sin is no match for God's joy. No more shall weeping be heard in Jerusalem, or the cry of distress.

What would human community look like with no one weeping? People would not die before they had "live[d] out a lifetime" (v. 20). How would such a community spend its resources? How would the common good be embraced when all people had the opportunity to live in the fullness of time? Health care, education, safe neighborhoods, plentiful good water, environmental stewardship—what if all these human goods are not just the pipe dreams of social idealists but the will and future of God? Our mission is simply to point toward the sure future that God has already announced. **Martha Sterne**

This passage encourages us to reconnect with the original creation that the God called good. It is about transforming that creation into something new. To understand this vision of a transformed world, it is helpful for us to see it through the lens of the incarnation of God. The totality of Jesus' life provides a whole new framework for understanding Isaiah's prophecy. Jesus' radical inclusivity, his model of claiming power

through nonviolent action, and his ministry of presence, his life, death, and resurrection provide a new set of lenses for the world to engage in the new creation, not as a goal to be looked for off in the distance, but one to be realized here and now.

The text describes transformation of living conditions in the new Jerusalem, including low infant mortality, housing and food for all citizens, and sustainable employment. We may not know how God means to transform the universe, but we can confess that we know it is in God's power to do this. What remains possible for the single believer, the single congregation, is to do the work involved in such transformation by following the patterns of mercy that Christ has laid out for us.

We are able to give one drink of cold water at a time. We are able to bring comfort to the poor, one act of mercy or change at a time. One book given, one friendship claimed, one covenant of love, one can of beans, one moment of commendation, one confession of God's presence but for the asking, one moment in which another person is humanized rather than objectified, one challenge to the set order that maintains injustice, one declaration of the evil that is hiding in plain sight, one declaration that every person is a child of God: these acts accumulate within God's grace. The church's job is not to cloister itself proclaiming the resurrection just in the everlasting. The proclamation is for the resurrection of life in this world as well.

There is no denying that elements of radical suffering still exist in the world. However, we are given a foretaste of the new heavens and earth through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Created by God, we are given gifts and abilities and invited in to participate in the ongoing formation of the new Jerusalem for all children of God whereby we can work to diminish suffering. The question is, how do we get in on what God is already doing? Are we identifying our God-given gifts to figure out how it is we can participate in the kingdom of God here and now? Taken collectively with those of other believers, single acts of serving God and neighbor illustrate God's kingdom breaking into the world today. Examples of such signs include the work of the Carter Center out of Atlanta, Georgia, and Samaritan Patrol in Tucson, Arizona.

The Carter Center focuses on advancing human rights and alleviating unnecessary suffering in the world. One of their health programs works with agencies to eradicate river blindness, caused by a parasite. This disease affects the poorest of the poor. Elimination of this threat is not difficult with the administration of a drug to prevent and treat the disease. With Merck offering the drug to those in need at no cost, the key is having people work together to educate the afflicted population and distribute the medicine.

The Samaritan Patrol, an interfaith organization made up of volunteers in Tucson, navigates the Sonoran Desert along the U.S./Mexico border, looking for migrants in distress. With a jeep full of water, food, and medical supplies, ordinary human beings (including at least one translator and one medical professional) provide emergency care and aid to those in need. As they do so, they exemplify God's call to claim those who are our neighbors and to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. In response to the grace of God extended to them, individuals and groups respond to needs in the midst of God's creation and thus participate in the new Jerusalem. **Mary Eleanor Johns**

Along with the Carter Center and the Samaritan Patrol, other economic justice is never far from Isaiah's vision. In a human community created for the joy of God, labor is not done for the rich and the few. The land is God's gift to all; as all join in the work of building and planting, we shall all inhabit the dwellings and eat the fruits of our labor. To labor in vain and not to see an escape for one's children is the scourge of exile and captivity. God rejoices in and blesses lives of justice with prosperity.

The sustenance of true community is in deep and active relationship with God. God's promise in Isaiah is to be listening so closely to the people that before they call, God will answer, and before they get their concern out of their mouth, God will hear. Such an intimacy is already and always available, if we simply have ears to hear the loving and constant invitation.

The passage ends with the beloved metaphor of the wolf and the lamb—the predator and the prey—feeding together. The fiercest animal Isaiah can think of, the lion, munches on straw like an ox. The lowly, wily serpent no longer bites people and their livestock, but its food is dust. Thus we circle back to the mystery of the creation of new heavens and new earth where no creature shall hurt or destroy on God's holy mountain.

Most of us, struggling with our own difficult days, find it almost impossible to move beyond an understanding of the world as a survival-of-the-fittest kind of place. This is what we see and what we fear we will always be up against. But our scripture offers an invitation to imagine a world of tenderness and plenty on God's peaceable mountain, a mysterious, evocative reality fully within God's capacity to create new heavens and a new earth. **Martha Sterne**

God invites us to be glad and to rejoice for what God is doing in our lives!

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