



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
 Asheville, North Carolina
 13 November 2022
 Sermon: The Holy Mountain
 Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Isaiah 65:17-25

Isaiah 65:17-25 (NRSV)

65:17 For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.

65:18 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.

65:19 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.

65:20 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.

65:21 They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

65:22 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.

65:23 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.

65:24 Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear.

65:25 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.

Many of you may not know that GCPC has a men's group that meets every other Thursday morning at 9:00 over zoom. My spouse affectionally calls us the 'grumpies' – as in, 'Are you going to meet with the rest of the grumpies this morning?' – because of our penchant for complaining together about the state of the world and everything in it.

Last September, our group read a *New York Times* editorial by the Anglican Priest Tish Harrison Wilson entitled, "Why Pastors Are Burning Out."¹ It began with the shocking Barna Group Study statistic that in March of 2022, almost half of all Christian clergy said they had considered leaving ministry in the past year. Wilson cites the emotional toll of the pandemic, losing members to illness without being able to see them or share in collective grief. She also cites the toll of navigating divisions within congregations around masks, social justice, politics. Wilson tells a story:

When my friend and the rector of my church, Shawn McCain Tirres, tried to explain what the past few years have been like for pastors, he had trouble finding words. He listed difficulties — the pandemic, church members getting sick and dying, political polarization, church members losing jobs and struggling financially, disputes over race after the murder of George Floyd, the 2020 election. "Everything snowballed," he said. Close friends would check in and ask how he was doing. He'd smile and say he was fine and then burst into tears.

The Men's group paired this article with another one from the Presbyterian Outlook about the steep drop in enrollment in Presbyterian seminaries. In the last 15 years, there has been a 45% drop in seminary enrollment, calling into question the viability of theological education in this country.²

Needless to say, it was a particularly grumpy meeting of the grumpy men – I do hope they will forgive me this running joke through my sermon. As I'm sure they know, I say it with love, and I think they've adjusted to my style of humor through the years.

¹ Tish Harrison Warren, "Why Pastors Are Burning Out," *The New York Times*. August 28, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/28/opinion/pastor-burnout-pandemic.html>

² Lee Hinson-Hasty, "What is the future of pastoral leadership in the PC(USA)?" *The Presbyterian Outlook*. September 2, 2022. <https://pres-outlook.org/2022/09/what-is-the-future-of-pastoral-leadership-in-the-pcusa/>

More specifically, as you can imagine, that morning's topic had *me* in an especially grumpy mood, and it was the other members of the group who helped me out of it. I remember asking toward the end of the meeting, "If you all had a college-age child who wanted to go into the ministry, would you try to talk them out of it?" And, with perhaps a bit too much candor, and far too much disillusion, I blurted out, half-jokingly, "Well, I sure would!"

And the men, all of whom are older than me and many of whom have walked with their children through such vocational decisions, collectively pulled me back. They reminded me first of a fact that I knew very well from my teenage years, that anytime a parent tries to talk a teenager out of anything, much less a call from God, it has the equal and opposite effect of making them even more determined.

But they were also more optimistic about ministry, about the beloved community, about the possibilities still intact today for the movement of Spirit and the opportunities of pastoral leadership. No, they wouldn't talk their kids out of a call to ministry. And by the end of the conversation, I admitted, neither would I.

Have you ever noticed, how our vision of the future guides our action in the present? If, for example, all you see in the future of the *capital C* Church, the Church worldwide, is declining membership, closing seminaries, endless squabbles, coming pandemics, how you could lose heart?

The Book of Isaiah can be divided up into 3 parts, each written in a different time of Jerusalem's history. By the time we get to chapter 65, we are at a difficult period in the history of the people. They are returning to the land after the Babylonian exile. Jerusalem is in ruins, the temple destroyed. They are facing the incredible task of rebuilding. But the people are divided; injustice runs rampant:

58:1

Shout out, do not hold back!
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!

Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.

Throughout, the prophet calls the people to repentance and justice:

58:6

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to let the oppressed go free,

and to break every yoke?

By the time we get to ch. 65, we learn that the divisions within the country are at a breaking point:

v.13 Therefore thus says the Lord GOD:

My servants shall eat,
but you shall be hungry;
my servants shall drink,
but you shall be thirsty;
my servants shall rejoice,
but you shall be put to shame.

There is an *us* and a *them*. The wheat and the chaff. Saints and sinners. But just when you feel like this division will rule the day, suddenly this vision breaks through in our passage:

For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;

the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.

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.

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;

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

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.

What is remarkable about this vision is how it can simultaneously be both a utopia and also entirely possible:

- People enjoying the labor of their hands rather than it being stolen out from under them.

- People enjoying natural lifetimes rather than being cut short by war or disease.
- People working together with rather than abusing creation and its animal kingdom.

This is key. Isaiah's new creation is a vision of God's future that has everything to do with our life here and now; it is about the ways we treat one another, and pursue justice, and interact with this natural world.

It is a vision of God's eternal purpose for creation that we are called to embody today.

Have you ever noticed, how our vision of the future guides our action in the present? How does this vision of God's future show up today? How does this vision of God's future show up today?

The answer can be found in the technicians, the doctors, the nurses, the administrators, the custodians, the care-takers and everyone else who have walked every day this week into hospitals flooded by children and the elderly with RSV, the flu, and covid. They have shown up not because we live in Isaiah's new heaven and new earth but because they work, as one commentator puts it, "out of a yearning for the world in which there shall no longer be 'an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime.'"³

The answer is in the activists who persist, and the canvas workers going door to door, and the poet, who has guided our fall worship, with words read over and again from this pulpit, that "All black lives matter, no matter what!"⁴ They keep showing up, not because we live in Isaiah's new heaven and new earth but because they are guided by a vision of a world where all "shall long enjoy the work of their hands" and "not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity."

The answer is you, Grace Covenant, and our siblings of faith, who keep showing up, in worship, in fellowship, in service and partnership in and outside church walls, not because we live in Isaiah's new heaven and new earth but because we are guided by the vision of the beloved community.

³ Paul D. Hanson, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 246. In this section, Hanson is talking about foreign aid health workers. I adapted the quote for our context. I am drawing on Hanson's commentary of the passage throughout this section.

⁴ Amanda Gorman, "Faith & Fury," in *Call Us What We Carry: Poems* (New York: Viking, 2021), 155-157.

Yes, it may be easy some days to lose hope, to become cynical. The community of Isaiah's time had every right to be divided and disillusioned. But, as we join our ancestors in the faith in grieving what has been lost, like them we also are guided by a future vision, a vision of God's future, a future that we are invited to help usher into our present.

May Isaiah's vision guide us in the days to come. May we choose hope instead of cynicism, care instead of contempt, justice instead of apathy, every day looking ahead to the day when the wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the new heavens and a new earth become our reality.

And it is in that hope that we say, thanks be to God. Amen.