

Sermon: Sunday, November 13, 2016 Isaiah 65: 17-25
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

Last Sunday, we gathered in this place, concerned about the upcoming US Election, bringing our prayers for a nation deeply divided. This morning, we gather in the same place, many of us in a state of disbelief that Tuesday night unfolded as it did; and we are still concerned for our neighbours.

In some parts of the USA, there has been an increase in hate crimes, as sexism and racism have seemingly been given the stamp of approval from the highest office in the land. In cities across the nation, young people are taking to the streets in protest and on Friday night, one protester in Portland was shot – not by police, but by another citizen with a different opinion.

We are concerned, not only for our neighbours but for our world, knowing the military, economic and environmental influence that the USA holds. And if we step back from the immediacy of last week's Presidential election to look at what was already going on in the world – the actions of ISIS, the critical situation in Mosul, the ongoing devastation of Aleppo - our concerns are well-founded.

In these emotional times, the picture of beauty and hope presented by the 65th chapter of Isaiah may appear delusional. And yet, I think these specific words of hope are exactly what we need to hear, because they remind us of how present God is in our most challenging times, and how God's horizon line of hope keeps us moving forward.

For generations, the people of Israel had been in exile in Babylon and could only dream of what it would be like to return home to Jerusalem, but once they did go home, the dream turned to a nightmare. The holy city had been vandalized and looted, beloved places reduced to rubble, and people who had taken over some of the better properties had no intention of going anywhere.

From the middle of the rubble, the author of Isaiah 65 looks at the heartbreaking mess all around them and declares, for all times and all peoples, that this desolation is not God's intention. In full acknowledgement of how bad things were, these words give specific examples of God's rebuilding, redeeming love.

Seminary President Rev. Carla Sunberg writes this:

“The children of Israel had suffered in exile and lost much of their joy. Pregnancy no longer brought hope, but fear. Springtime simply signaled another year to suffer in separation from the promised land.... God speaks through the prophet Isaiah 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.”

So what would life look like, if we actually embraced God's hopes for the human race? Isaiah is specific: infant mortality, which ran at 50% or higher in those days, to be a thing of the past. In a place where few people lived past the age of 50, the lifespan would double. As they saw their houses either destroyed or inhabited by squatters, the new pattern will involve living in the house you have built and enjoying the produce grown on your own land. Is this vision worldly, or other-worldly? A bit of both: it's a bit beyond our capacity to convince wolves and lambs to coexist harmoniously, but the other points of this Divine agenda are things that people can strive for in our day: improving conditions for expectant mothers and newborns, expanding health care so it is available for all people in the world, workers' rights, securing local food production. And it's not just for us, it's for everyone; if even one nation, even one person, is suffering, the

work is not yet done. It's a vision intended to be our horizon line, showing us in practical terms what it would look like if we everyone opened him or herself to God's redeeming grace, and it encourages us to commit ourselves 100% to peace and justice over and over again, each morning when we get up, each evening when we lay down to rest.

In times of great pressure, Isaiah's voice needs to be heard. In 1987, Shannon and I did a summer internship in the Philippines, and when we returned to Canada did some 30 slide-show presentations to Churches, UCWs and youth groups around the lower mainland and back home in Saskatchewan. We never did the same exact presentation twice, but two things remained constant as we presented what we had seen: first, we did not soft-sell the hardships that the people of the Philippines were enduring; and second, we nearly always ended our presentations with this reading from Isaiah 65, for this scripture speaks so clearly of the glimmers of hope that are to be seen even in the midst of hardship. In the Philippines, we saw time and again, that the more dire the circumstances, the more people experienced the presence of God in Christ; we saw, time and again, God's own love in human form as courageous Christian organizations put themselves in harm's way to challenge those who would target the poorest of the poor; and we heard, in the people's own voices, a determination to work toward a world where these things were true, even if their efforts would show no immediate benefit. Words like these from Isaiah may sound like wishful thinking to us cynical folks in North America, but when you're up against the forces of life and death these words, written in the very midst of hardship, say that the fight for justice, starting with the rights of the poor and marginalized, is not just a human fight; it is the very will of God.

Casting our gaze once more upon our neighbours south of the 49th parallel, there is another voice which spoke up in a previous time of hardship, which needs to be heard now, by us and by them. It's a voice that clearly understood the message of Isaiah 65, and other scriptures of liberation: the voice of the civil rights movement, most powerfully expressed in the words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In the midst of the current popularity of hatred and divisiveness, three quotes attributed to Dr. King come to mind:

"Darkness can't drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate can't drive out hate; only love can do that."

"I have decided to stick with love... hate is too great a burden to bear."

And, quoting an 1853 sermon by Unitarian Minister Thomas Parker, "**The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.**"

That last quote, in particular, says exactly what Isaiah was saying. God's vision of peace and harmony is so far removed from human systems that exalt the wealthy and punish the poor that it may appear false or fanciful, but as we recommit ourselves daily to that vision, we align our lives with God's own destiny. The walk of peace is not a day hike, it is the journey of our lives: in choosing to walk that walk, and supporting others in their walk, and, together, opposing any force that would try to stop or divert the walk toward peace and justice, we give ourselves over completely to God's own vision. And, we arrive at a fourth and final quote from Dr. King:

"Peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal"

The words of Isaiah 65 were not written from the distant safety of the ivory tower, they came from people's on-the-ground experiences of hardship, which magnifies their power exponentially. I find the same to be true of the words chosen by Dr. King, who spoke so eloquently and bravely amidst the name-calling and the beatings and the bombings and the

lynchings, and gave his life for the God's cause of racial justice at the all-too-young age of 39. As we choose to engage these turbulent times, rather than being shut down by them; as we keep reaching out in kindness, to anyone and everyone in need; as we challenge thoughts and actions that systemically target specific ethnic or gender groupings and diminish their opportunities in life; as we honour the sacrifice of all those who have given their lives for the greater common good; we not only commit ourselves to a future realm of peace, but embody Christ's spirit of reconciliation; we become part of God's unfolding narrative of peace.

In that spirit, I invite you to observe a minute of silence in which bring to mind all people for whom these are not just academic or intellectual concerns, but issues of death and life. We remember with thankfulness all those who have engaged in the fight against tyranny of any sort, including the veterans of Canada's wars; we bring to mind all people who are or have been targeted because of their religion or ethnicity, remembering in particular the victims of the Armenian genocide 100 years ago; we bring to mind all who even today, live in war zones, offering prayers of thanksgiving for the safe arrival of the Kahkejian family in our midst and prayers of concern for family members still in Syria; we bring to mind all who fear what the US election results will mean for their lives and for the life of the world; and to all these, we invite the promise of peace, that it will be known in all nations and in all lives.

<our sixty seconds of silence, begins now>

The hymn leading us out of silence, is our Heritage Hymn: O Love that wilt not let me go, VU 658.

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