

**Sermon: November 17, 2019 – Isaiah 65: 17-25**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

What are our longings? What do we yearn for? This is what that the writer of Isaiah 65 was wrestling with, as he searched for Divine hope for the next steps of his people's journey.

Isaiah is a tricky book to pin down. Though named for “a” prophet, as it appears to have been written by a collection of prophetic authors – at least three, perhaps more – spanning several generations of the people of Judah. The wonderful, poetic words we heard this morning are from a time when the people were returning from exile in Babylon, and the reconstruction of the Jerusalem temple was either in the final planning stages, or already happening. And while there was elation at their return home after forced absence, they also experienced something very common for those who have longed for something for a long time, and then it comes within their grasp: disappointment at things *not being as idyllic as anticipated*.

Part of the letdown, came from the fact that *almost none of them could actually picture what home looked like*, since they had been gone for seventy years. Much of Jerusalem had been reduced to rubble, and the surrounding land hadn't been empty while they were away; new people had come to consider it as *their* home for those same 70 years. And not all of the Jewish people had been exiled: a small remnant, mostly those who were very elderly and/or frail, had been left behind, and some of them had descendants on the land. So when the new regime allowed the Judeans to return home, there was an unexpected complexity to it.

In the midst of this mess of feelings – joy at returning home, and confusion at these unwanted interactions – it was the prophet's job to say something on behalf of God. Take a moment, to try to enter that difficult space, and with your mind and your heart and your gut, envision and feel and hold what it would be like to hear of God's commitment to something radically new, as we hear the scripture once more:

<sup>17</sup> For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;  
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.  
<sup>18</sup> 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.  
<sup>19</sup> 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.  
<sup>20</sup> 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.  
<sup>21</sup> They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. <sup>22</sup> 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.  
<sup>23</sup> 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.  
<sup>24</sup> Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear.  
<sup>25</sup> 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.

The images are evocative, the tone is upbeat, there's a poetic lilt to these words ...AND... they are *deeply grounded in the people's present realities*. As big as this vision is, it isn't just other-worldly, “pie in the sky when you die” talk; it addresses people's emotional lives, and aging, and housing, and food security, and infant mortality, and promises a deep commitment to peace. Yes, some of the most beautiful images are clearly other-worldly, like wolves and lambs living harmoniously together, and a utopian view of a holy city, but for the most part these words affirm that God sees and is concerned about the lives we live. The struggles of our lives are not lived in isolation from the Divine presence, the One whose love for us is deep.

Which is all good and encouraging to hear... but what difference might this vision, of Jerusalem circa 500 BCE, make in your life and my life and the life of the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Let's examine three chunks of this reading, and find out.

**Verses 21-22** are like a magnet to me each time I encounter this scripture: *"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."*

What a simple thing to hope for: plant a crop, eat a crop. Build a house and live in it, do a job and be paid for it. And yet in the days of Isaiah, as now, those simple hopes are far-away yearnings for many. With so many young adults now doing one lightly-paid internship after another, or scrambling from one contract job to another, the notion of living in a house of your own rather than paying rent to someone else, is barely even on the horizon, especially here in costly Canmore. In so many nations of the world, cash crops have completely taken over from subsistence crops: you plant so that somebody else may eat, or if you're planting cotton, you plant and somebody else *wears*, and you hope that the corporation that owns the land dribbles enough cash in your hand for you to provide a home and food for your family and to send at least *one* of your children to school. This simple, earthy vision is still far-off for far too many.

God's intention, communicated through Isaiah 65, was for a simplicity of meaningful labour. You plant, you eat, you build, you live. But one part that we might not see, was how political these words were, as God's words always are.

Australian professor Anna Grant-Henderson, points out that part of the initial plan for the reconstruction of Jerusalem was to put foreigners to work in the heavy work of rebuilding the walls. This wouldn't necessarily be slave labour, but it is clear that the heavy lifting, literally, would be done by people who were in essence walling in a city that they would then live outside of. ("We're going to build a wall and Mexico's going to pay for it" comes to mind).

But these words of Isaiah suggest that this new creation will be for the benefit of anyone who trusts in God – not just those with an ethnic connection to the God of Abraham and Sarah. *Everyone* will plant and enjoy their harvest, *everyone* will build and inhabit, not just the entitled dominant culture, and that message of justice still calls out to our divided world. Isaiah pictures a new way, where all are welcomed by God – those who have long identified themselves as faithful followers, and those newly arrived to the land or the faith – and the simplest of needs, food and housing, are fairly met, for ALL of them. I can scarcely imagine a world organized on those principles, but oh, do I ever yearn for it.

The second verses I'd like to look at, *surround* the first verses we looked at: **verses 20 and 23**

*<sup>20</sup> 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....*

*<sup>23</sup> 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.*

This is a pretty well-travelled congregation. I invite you, if possible, to bring to mind places you have visited, where infant mortality is high, and life expectancy is low. Think of places you have visited, or places you have lived, where war is now so endemic that children are basically "born for calamity". Think of indigenous communities where nobody can remember what it was like before the boil-water advisory. Think of places, in this land and others, where literacy rates are low and organized crime is high. If you can bring faces and names into this vision, please do so, because the things that Isaiah brings forward into our consciousness are so very human.

And Isaiah, putting voice to the intention of the Divine, declares a new way: where children live and thrive and are born into hopefulness rather than hopelessness. When Shannon and I returned from our summer internship in the Philippines, we did dozens of slide shows, and they would often end with this exact passage from Isaiah 65, and even 32 years later, these are the faces that come to my mind. In the projects to the Mission and Service fund, in our active response as citizens when we hear of any level of government diminishing or dismissing social or medical supports, we state our

allegiance to God's yearnings, for a world where no child will be left behind, and no adult will be stranded in pain.

The final focus verses, are right at the beginning: **verses 17 and 18**: "*For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. 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.*"

In this Sunday just one week after Remembrance Day, it is a bit jarring to hear that "the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind" but I do not think this takes aim at honouring our predecessors. What it is saying, is how easy it is for societies to get stuck in ruts. Many of our old patterns of being, even well-loved ones, can thwart us. Into our settled lives, God proposes something new, something now, something unfolding, unburdened by some common patterns of thought and behaviour that have diminished life for countless generations.

John Dominic Crossan, one of the presenters at the Universal Christ Conference this spring, has long contrasted the human propensity to "get even" via retributive justice, with what God actually desires, which Crossan calls "distributive justice," a world freed from violence and motivated by fair treatment of all, with particular attention to those often left outside the circle of care. Crossan acknowledges that even in the Bible there is this tension, with some very violent and ultra-nationalist stories very much at odds with the overall longing for Shalom, putting it this way: "The struggle is not between divine good and human evil but between, on the one hand God's radical dream for an Earth distributed fairly and nonviolently among all its peoples and, on the other hand, civilization's normal dream for me keeping mine, getting yours, and having more and more, forever." When Isaiah talks about not remembering the old ways, then, I think this is what's being forgotten: the old score-card, of getting even and just a bit more, a self-perpetuating, destructive cycle with which we are all too familiar. And nowhere, perhaps, does that scorecard need to be set aside more than in Jerusalem, the very city pictured in Isaiah's vision. We cannot hear these words, without praying for peace founded in justice in Jerusalem, and Gaza, and the West Bank, and Syria, and Yemen, and throughout the Middle East.

And something curious: this vision says that it's not just *earth* that will be new. As we have examined, this is a very "earthy" vision. But the heavens, too, are scheduled for a makeover, and the best interpretation I can come up for on this point, is that as God seeks a new relationship with us a "new heaven" is also needed, in order for the interface with a new earth to work. Much as God is traditionally seen as fixed, permanent and unchangeable, we also understand God's love as *adaptive*, finding us and filling our hearts when life hits us hard. So not only earth but even the heavens open up, as God's loving will is perceived and embraced.

I return, then, to that first question of this sermon: what are our longings? What do we yearn for? The answer, I believe, begins with gratitude for the encouraging, supportive God who has brought us this far in the journey, and then calls us forward in Christian discipleship and witness as we progress toward new horizons. We give thanks for the gifts of life, and seek a world where all can enjoy the gifts that are intended for all. We open ourselves to God's love, and in the name of that love, seek a world where the impoverished will gain their fair share, and all will have access to water, food, shelter, education, health, and supportive community. We step back from our personal scorecards and yearn for a world freed from retribution... a world where God's vision of deep peace will find a home. May *our* longings lead us to *God's* longings, and our yearnings lead us to step beyond what is comfortable, into courageous, challenging circles of care. In Christ we pray, Amen.

References cited:

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