

Sermon: Soon, But Not Yet

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19**

The two hymns we read earlier follow oracles of judgement and war and invasion, but they look beyond current reality to that day when God will bring comfort and salvation, and for that hopeful future, the people give thanks. They praise God for what will be in the future, soon but not yet.

We live in difficult and complicated times, far removed from the level of survival of the fittest described by Thomas Hobbes when he said, “The condition of man...is a condition of war of everyone against everyone.” Still, life is not easy for most of the world’s people. It’s not yet a world of peace and plenty for everyone. Even people of means know that they have to keep at it in the same way a shark has to keep swimming.

Looking ahead to an uncertain future takes time, energy, and patience.

In Lebanon, for example, thousands of people have emigrated in the past three years in search of opportunities and security. Just last year, the number of people leaving Lebanon increased by 446% over the year before.

In neighboring Syria, the displacement crisis continues as their civil war and the economic collapse it caused has forced people from their homes. Today the UN estimates that 6.8 million Syrians have fled the country, while another nearly seven million remain displaced within Syria. Some of these people have settled elsewhere and established a new life. But many others move from place to place to find somewhere safe to settle down, if they can.

Many people live in a world far removed from the Kingdom of God, where all people will be able to live with the peace of knowing that their children will be safe, happy, and healthy.

The passage from Isaiah chapter 65 is getting close to the end of his book, and the conversation is beginning to turn toward homecoming and vindication, but first God wants to make sure that everyone is on board with what God is about to do.

There is talk at the end of chapter 64 that the holy cities have become a wilderness; Jerusalem a desolation; the Temple burned by fire. “After all this,” the people said, “will you restrain yourself, LORD? Will you keep silent, and punish us so severely?” (64:12)

And God said, “I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask,
to be found by those who did not seek me.

I said, ‘Here I am, here I *am*’,
to a nation that did not call on my name. (65:1)

And then God gives an answer which is worth reading in full, but the end result is, the former troubles are forgotten and are hidden from God’s sight (65:16c). What God is about to do will happen not yet, but soon.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus’ description of the future is unsettling – he’s inviting us to not be terrified. It helps to remember that Luke is writing some time after the Temple’s destruction – again – so his audience would find some of what Jesus said familiar. He’s really talking about things that have actually happened already.

And when it seems as if things can’t get any worse, Jesus gets personal: *you* will be persecuted; *you* will be arrested. But that’s okay because then you will have the opportunity to counter the falsehoods. When everything looks dark, you can speak the truth and say, let me tell you about Jesus and his teachings.

All these things have to happen first before anyone will be willing to listen, like the people in Isaiah who, after enduring war and exile, are finally listening to what God is offering. And it’s working – the people are beginning to see the end of their long national nightmare.

Now, if you look behind the text in Isaiah, God says a few things that may escape us. In verse 22, when God says, “They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat,” maybe that means there will be no slave labor in the new creation. Or no building contractors. And in verse 25, there is a hint that God is maybe still peeved at the serpent, long after the Genesis Incident all those years ago.

Also, in Revelation, the old creation, the first heaven and the first earth, had passed away and was gone (21:9-21), but here, Isaiah is talking about a fundamental transformation brought about by God.

But the biggest thing is Holy amnesia, Batman! The former things will not be remembered. Human sin is no match for God’s joy in those who repent and return to God.

Things sound great for the returning exiles in Isaiah, but how do we interpret the Gospel reading today? It sounds as if a new disaster is heading straight for Jerusalem, like Hurricane Ian bearing down on Sanibel Island. Civil war, plagues and famines, plus ‘great signs from heaven.’ Even nature will turn against the disciples. All the usual symbols of stability will fail.

Where’s the hope and grace in that? The passage looks pretty bleak, but we know Jesus wouldn’t leave us hanging without offering us some good news.

However, one scholar wrote that “These are not predictions of future occurrences but remembrances of an immediate past with implications for survival in a very real present.”¹

But then, in the last verse, Jesus says, “By your endurance you will gain your souls,” with *endurance* meaning a faithful reliance on God.

What seems like a scary preview of an inescapable future is really a radical call to faith.

God’s word comes to us in judgement and in salvation.² In what passes away and in what comes next, we hear God speaking to us right now in a living faith. By God’s grace, we are invited to participate in the new creation, to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8b). And for that, Isaiah says that God’s people will enjoy long life, the fruits of their labor, and peace and tranquility.

Being Christians, we find ourselves somewhere between the Resurrection and the Second Coming, also known as the End Times. Jesus specifically tells us that we won’t know when we’ll see him again. So, what do we do in the meantime? Jesus says to focus on the task at hand, which is ministry. And about that, he said it may be risky.

We could say, fine, I’m going home to watch television for the rest of my life. No one would argue. Except – Jesus persistently calls on us to love and care for our neighbors. As a church, we have work to do, and the challenge is to continue, even expand, our ministries despite and because of our uncertain times. Serving people in a messed-up world is nothing new.

The end is not near. In fact, in Jesus Christ, the end has already arrived. Jesus overcame it in the Resurrection. That’s the Good News and it enables us to live in this soon-but-not-yet world, and to make the most of it by doing God’s work now.

Amen.

¹ Carmen Nanko-Fernández. 2010. “Proper Twenty-Eight, Ordinary 33, Pentecost 25: November 14, 2010.” *Lectionary Homiletics* 21 (6): 55.

² Nelson Rivera. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year C, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013 paperback edition, 294.