

Proper 28 C
Isaiah 65:17-25
November 18, 2007
Thanksgiving Sunday

Sermon preached by Laura Merrill
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Notes not for publication

Reading the newspaper over the past couple of days has been a sobering experience. There was an earthquake in northern Chile; it was felt by Becky Harrell, our missionary there. She said in an email that when she ran outside, she looked up the hill and saw women scurrying to get their children from school. The fear of a tsunami and mudslides is great there and based on real life experience. In Bangladesh, a cyclone hit and killed more than 2000 people, in a land where they're barely surviving to begin with. And now the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the recent winners of the Nobel Peace Prize, have come out even more strongly on the dangers of global warming. They're saying the situation is critical, and that waiting even a few years to get serious about responding will endanger life on this planet in ways we may not be able to recover from.

Then I received an email talking about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I reflected on the mention of Jerusalem in the scripture today, and the history of bloodshed around the life of that city, beginning way back. By the Middle Ages, when the city rested in Muslim hands, the Church wanted it as a political tool for a Christian king. So the Pope made an argument for war and sent the Crusaders to kill all the Muslims they could. They went consumed with religious fervor, supposedly defending the honor of Jesus. And marching through Europe, on the way to Jerusalem, they massacred Jews

as well, just for good measure. Many people died in that city, for political ends that bore religious names.

In present-day Jerusalem, peace is still elusive. It sits in the midst of the bloody conflict between the nation of Israel and the Palestinians who live under terrible conditions of violence, instability and injustice. Israel has bulldozed homes and orchards, cut off basic human services, walled off whole communities, and fired bullets and bombs, which families must try to dodge. Some Palestinians have responded by using the means available to them to commit acts of violence on the ones they see as occupiers.

As for the Israelis, they accuse Palestinians of being murderous terrorists, and they stake their claim on the land God promised to Israel in the Bible. They point to the terrible atrocities committed against Jews through the centuries, especially by the Church or with its consent, and including attacks by Arabs. They assert their right to defend themselves against any threat. In this conflict, many, many innocent people have suffered and died, and many continue to do so. There have been efforts at peace, but more than once a major sticking point has been the question of who gets to control Jerusalem, the Holy City of God.

It is against this backdrop that we read the passage from Isaiah this morning. In today's harsh light, the reading sounds quaint at best. A Jerusalem that is God's joy and delight, where weeping will be heard no more? A new heaven and a new earth, where babies won't die, and people will grow very old in peace? A world where people

won't be exploited anymore for their labor, where a small part of the world's people won't live at the expense of everyone else?

I think we have a special place in our church brains for this kind of picture. We put it in the category of "Things the Bible Says But Doesn't Really Mean." We gaze upon the vision painted in the text, all the while knowing in our real life brains that such a thing is impossible. So this kind of vision becomes a kind of ornamentation for the church, like an ornate banner or stained glass window. I'm normally a sucker for this kind of scripture. I said last week that these prophetic words of hope in the midst of trouble are very powerful for me personally, and they will continue to be so. But as I poked around this week and thought about the change that would have to happen in us and in the world for this to be true, the text seemed to move farther away from me. The barriers are huge; death is powerful, and the human heart is stubborn. So what in the world could cause us to place real hope in this vision?

The only thing I can say is that believing in the promise of God may be our only way out of the mess we have made for ourselves, which extends way beyond any particular conflict. Israelis and Palestinians fight each other, but they do not do so in isolation. Their fight involves surrounding Arab nations; it touches our war in Iraq and our talk of a new war in Iran, which is connected to OPEC and our use of oil, which is connected to the effect of fossil fuels on global warming. Where that mess meets up with the promise of God is at the point where we realize that we have to make a choice. We can live for ourselves, for whatever strikes our fancy, whatever promises to make us more secure. This option is most attractive in a culture like ours, where there

are more resources lying around us than we know what to do with. We can pattern our lives around the prevailing wisdom of the day, which in our case is that we're good people and deserve to live comfortable lives. Our wisdom also says that more is always better, and that money can buy happiness.

We can follow that way, but it's a very short-sighted decision, and it's one that can involve God in name only. Usually for folks on the self-oriented path, God serves as a blessing on whatever we've already decided is important to us. I would say the Crusades fall into that category. But I believe God is trying to get us to see an alternative path in this idyllic picture. God sets before us the way things are supposed to be, in the hope that we might choose to take a different road. That choice would cause us to do something different; it would in fact change our very nature—as big a change as wolves feeding alongside sheep, without feeding on the sheep. I truly believe God sets before us a future promise, in order to make our present different. This is what Jesus meant when he said, “the kingdom of God is among you; the kingdom of God is at hand.” It meant that the kingdom won't just come when we all get to heaven. It means there are possibilities in the present moment that are visible when our eyes are truly seeking God and God's path.

When we make the choice to claim this vision as God's purpose for us, it shapes what we do; we can act into what we trust lies ahead of us. If we know that God has imagined a future in which people will plant their own gardens and eat their own fruit, wouldn't we strive for a world where people can do honest work with dignity and be self-sufficient, a world where people don't starve to death? If God sees the day when

people will build homes and get to live in the place they've built, wouldn't we work toward a world where homelessness and all the reasons behind it were eradicated? If God looks forward to a Jerusalem where mourning and crying and pain are no more, wouldn't we commit ourselves and all our best efforts to stopping the use of violence, in all its forms?

In the face of all the evil in the world, all the violence and destruction, it comes down to one question: Do we believe that God is at work in the world or not? Put another way, have we seen impossible things happen through the activity of love? Have we found life in our lives where there once was death? When the answer is yes, we know what we need to know. One of the marks of people of faith is that we are willing to suspend our disbelief in order to do what God tells us to do. The vision of God's good and peaceable kingdom seems ridiculous, impossible—but because we have decided to trust God, we allow ourselves to act on the vision, and it acts on us.

That's in part what we do in Holy Communion—we dare to believe that we are connected to God and to other Christians through space and time. We proclaim that one day we will all feast together at Christ's holy table. We make that future vision present here, today, as a glimmer, a glimpse of what will be. Acting into the vision is what some of you do when you answer the Barnabas Connection phone line and serve people in crisis. It's what we do when we commit our money to help people through the kinds of programs our communion offering will cover today. We look toward the future, seeking God, acting as if what God has said is true.

And we can also know that it's not all up to us, thanks be to God. For we hear God say, in today's verses 17-18, is, "I am about to create a new heaven and a new earth, a new Jerusalem and a new people." The verb used here for "create" is the same word used in Genesis 1, for what God did "in the beginning." And the really important thing about this word is that it is used only for God. This kind of creating is something only God can do. So while God looks for our response and our attention, the creation of the new thing is something God is going to do. It is not up to us to create people who don't kill or exploit or ignore each other anymore. That's God's job. Our job is to look for God to do it, to give ourselves to that process, and to proclaim to the world that this is indeed God's intention, to help others see they have a choice too.

One last story came to me through the internet this weekend. It was information on an event called the Bethlehem Children's Project. It said that former Israeli soldiers would work this December with Palestinians to deliver Christmas gifts in Bethlehem, "to build bridges of understanding and bring hope to children" (email from Friends of Sabeel, North America, fosna.org). This is only one of a variety of groups of Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims and Christians who are trying to cross the divide of impossibility in that land, to bring about reconciliation and hopefully one day, peace. Whatever their faith, these people have set their sights on a future that is changing the way they live in the present.

The final line of the email about Christmas in Bethlehem was an invitation that I think could serve as a call to us, to everyday life following Jesus. The line read, "Christian leaders, young and old, who understand the power of love to change the

world are invited to participate." So hear the call of God upon each of us, and upon us together, that we might not hurt or destroy on all God's holy mountain. As crazy as it sounds, knowing what we know, we can trust this is where our trust belongs.

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.