

Blessed by the Lord

Isaiah 65:17-25

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“Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth.” With those words we are invited into a glimpse of the work God will do one day. What follows is a powerful vision of the kingdom of God, a kingdom where healing and wholeness are evident everywhere, where life thrives and prospers, where relationships flourish, and where old hurts and wounds are covered by a reconciliation that runs so deep it strains our imagination. “The wolf and the lamb will live together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain.” This is the vision vividly displayed before us when God says, “I will create.”

The fact that it is God who will create makes clear to us the limitations we have as human beings. We might long for this type of kingdom, but we cannot create it. It is beyond our grasp. It is out of our reach. The image of the wolf and the lamb living together is a compelling image of the peace that will be present when God’s kingdom is fully present. We invited a dear Rabbi friend to preach at our church in Houston. I served on a board with him. Julie worked closely with him building the interfaith community. Our Rabbi friend had a deep and lasting commitment to peacemaking in all aspects of life. When this Jewish Rabbi came to preach at our Presbyterian church, he painted for us a beautiful image of the kingdom of God. He told about a field in Jerusalem where a wolf and a lamb lived together, where they lived side by side. My jaw dropped. Could it really be true, was there such a place that humans had created, where the wolf and the lamb lived side by side. As he told of this he said people came from far and wide to see this marvel. One person watched this with fascination and turned to the owner and asked, “How do you do this? How do you have a wolf and a lamb live together?” The owner said, “Well, it’s easy. We just get a new lamb every morning.”

My Rabbi friend had the biggest grin as he told us that punch line. In a humorous way he was reminding us that this image of the peaceable kingdom is not within our ability to create. It is out of our reach. It is beyond our limitations. So God speaks as we enter this vision of the kingdom of heaven, and God says very clearly, “I will create.” In fact God says that three times. “I will create.”

I wonder if this passage is not only showing us the limitations we have as humans. I wonder if this passage is showing us our failures as well. We cannot create a world where the wolf and the lamb live together. But Israel had so many other opportunities to create a world where they lived as the children of God, building and planting for a kingdom of justice and righteousness, a community that welcomed the alien and the stranger, a nation that protected the weak and the vulnerable, and a neighborhood where people loved one another. Instead of embracing their call and the commandment to live as God’s people, Israel failed as God’s covenant partner.

Long before God spoke in the 65th chapter of Isaiah to say, “I will create,” we find the early pages of Isaiah filled with charges that Israel had failed as God’s covenant partner.

- “You have rebelled against me...you are a sinful nation loaded with guilt...you have forsaken me, spurned me, turned your backs on me.” (Isaiah 1:2-4) How did Israel fail? What did Israel do wrong?
- They did not seek justice, or encourage the oppressed. They failed to defend the cause of the fatherless or plead the cause of the widow. (Isaiah 1:17)
- They rejected the law of the Lord and spurned the word of the Holy One of Israel. (Isaiah 5:24)
- When the prophet entered the presence of the Lord in the vision that is recounted in Isaiah 6 he cries out, “I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.” (Isaiah 6:5)
- In Isaiah 58 there is a stinging rebuke of the people who have chosen to practice the outward form of religion, in this case fasting, when within themselves they have selfish and hard hearts. In response to their trust in the fact that they were fasting God says, “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice, and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?” (Isaiah 58:6,7)
- In these and so many other ways Israel failed as God’s covenant partner.

So in our passage this morning, it is as if God says to Israel, to his covenant partner who had failed so miserably, it is if God says, “No. You are getting it all wrong. This is what I am about. This is my kingdom. Stop what you are doing and watch me. I will create.” By the end of our passage telling us of the new heavens and the new earth the wolf and the lamb are living together, the lion is eating straw like an ox, there is no harming or destroying of life on God’s holy mountain, the sounds of weeping and crying have disappeared, and in place of the mourning and tears there is joy, there is delight, and there is rejoicing. In response to the failure of Israel as God’s covenant partner, God does not give up on Israel. Instead God says, ‘I will create new heavens and new earth.’”

I take great comfort that when Israel failed, when humans fail, when we fail, God sort of pushes us aside, steps forward, and says, “I’ve got this.” To a people who have failed, God says, “I will create.” And what God creates is beautiful. What God creates is filled with hope and peace and joy. If all we had today was this promise of God future, this promise that God will create new heavens and new earth, we would be blessed. This promise of new heavens and new earth is powerful and it is life giving.

But this promise of the future is not the only comfort we have from God. Along with showing us what surely must be, along with showing us a vision for how things will be, along with showing us a vision of new heavens and new earth, along with showing us a clear and compelling vision for how all things will end, God also shows us how this will all begin.

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for. A voice of one calling: ‘In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.’” (Isaiah 40:1-3) There came a man sent from God. His name was John. He came as the one who was the voice crying in the desert. His message was a message of justice and restoration. Mountains shall be made low and valleys will rise and be filled. This is an image of justice. When the people hear his message they ask, “What shall we do?” His response was basic and simple, while at the same time evoking images of God’s holy mountain. If you have two coats, share with somebody in need. If you have food, do the same thing. If you collect taxes be honest, be fair. If you are a soldier don’t extort money or accuse people falsely. Not the whole kingdom. Not the whole vision. Nevertheless, there are pieces of that kingdom. There are samples and there is a sprinkling of justice and righteousness. But his greatest comfort is the prophecy of the one who will come after him, the one whose sandals he is not fit to untie.

“I baptize you with water, but one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” When that one more powerful came, when that one named Jesus came and was baptized, heaven was opened and the Spirit of God descended on him like a dove. The heavenly voice said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” (See the baptism of Jesus in Luke and Matthew) This very Jesus stood up in his hometown synagogue and proclaimed his mission. He proclaimed his mission using the words found in Isaiah 61: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” The poor, the prisoner, the blind, the oppressed, they all hear the good news. They all hear the good news that they have been blessed with God’s favor.

When Jesus came he came as God incarnate. His name is Immanuel, that name whose promise comes from the pages of Isaiah. Immanuel means “God is with us.” In a real sense God said, “I’ve got this.” I’ll show you what it means to do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with God. Jesus was God incarnate. Jesus showed us where the feet of God would walk, who the hands of God would touch, and what the mouth of God would say. And wherever he walked, and whoever he touched, and whatever he said, he brought the kingdom of God to life. That great vision we have in Isaiah 65 comes to life in Jesus. “The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.” (Matthew 11:5)

If we hold up that beautiful image of heaven that we have been given in Isaiah 65 we see Jesus little by little and piece by piece, indeed person by person, bringing color, bringing life, bringing healing, and bringing hope. You want to see the kingdom of heaven? “I’ve got this”, says the Son of God. The early church looked back on the life of Jesus with wonder and awe. They saw that he had torn down the walls of hostility that isolate and separate humans. They saw that in Christ Jesus God was reconciling the world to himself. They saw that in Jesus Christ God was giving his gift of new creation. “In Christ Jesus there is new creation. The old is gone and the new has come.”

And yet we would do a grave injustice to the prophecy in Isaiah if we left out the promise of the servant of God who would come, whose coming would initiate and inaugurate the kingdom of heaven. This servant would be one who suffers. This suffering servant would be the same one we call Immanuel. This suffering servant would show us the depth of God’s love for humanity. He would suffer for us. This description of the suffering servant is found in Isaiah 53. “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” (Isaiah 53:3-5)

Somehow, in the mystery of God, in the sovereignty of God, the suffering of Jesus brought the kingdom to life in ways we struggle to grasp. Somehow, in the mystery of God, he took our sin upon himself when he died on the cross. But that is not all. By taking our sin he was able to give us his righteousness.

This morning I want to focus on one particular aspect of what Jesus has done for us, and it is in the context of this beautiful image of heaven, of the kingdom of God we have been given in Isaiah 65. That kingdom still reminds us of our limitations. We cannot make the wolf and the lamb live together. That has not changed. It is still out of reach and beyond our grasp. But now, as that vision shines as a beacon of hope, we are no longer bound by our failures or doomed to repeat our failures. This Jesus, who as God incarnate lived into the fullness of God's kingdom, whose love and light animated our vision of heaven and of the kingdom of God, this Jesus has given us his righteousness. Now as ones who bear his righteousness, we are not doomed to failure. We cannot create heaven on earth. But we can participate in the kingdom.

We cannot make the wolf live with the lamb. But we can be part of God's work to bring reconciliation on this earth. What we are part of here on earth will never equal what God has in store in heaven. What we are part of here on earth will never compare. And yet what we are part of here on earth can be beautiful in its own way. And it can serve to keep us focused on that great and glorious day when the mountain of the Lord will be established in all of its glory. A man named Dick and his wife Pam had our family over to dinner. Dick grilled some hot dogs...to perfection I might add. While this might not seem like a big deal, the fact that Dick and Pam are Jewish, and that they had also invited a very sweet family of six Muslim children over along with our Christian family lets you know this was a very special evening. The six Muslim children, the Wahabzaba family, had been orphaned. Their parents were put to death in Afghanistan, and the children were in Houston as refugees. Pam took on a mother's role with those six Muslim children who had been orphaned come as refugees. That is how it came to be that we, a Christian family, shared a meal of hot dogs prepared by a Jewish man with six orphaned Muslim children. The feelings of kindness and tenderness that filled the house of Dick and Pam Klein that night will always stand out to me, not as heaven, but as a foretaste of heaven, an example of the kingdom of heaven coming right here to life on earth.

We got to know Dick and Pam Klein when Pam came to Interfaith Ministries when Julie was working there. Pam told Julie that she had a deep hurt in her life and was looking for a way to serve others. Julie connected Pam with the Refugee Resettlement Program and Pam became a mother to several of the Sudanese refugees, called the Lost Boys. These boys were Christian and Pam was Jewish. That was fine. The difference in faith was not a hindrance for Pam as she reached out in love.

Pam became special friends with a young man, a Sudanese lost boy named James. Unfortunately, James was very sick and spent most of his time in the hospital. Pam visited him frequently, and around December of that year, she came to Julie and said she wanted to do something special for James. She asked if Julie had any ideas. Julie suggested that Pam bring Christmas to James in the hospital. Pam's face lit up. This seemed like a great idea. Then Pam realized there was one small problem. Pam said to Julie, "I'm a Jew. I don't know how to do Christmas!" Julie told her how to do Christmas, and sure enough Pam, a Jewish woman, brought Christmas to James, a young Christian man.

When James did not improve, and his death drew near, Pam came to his bedside. The night James died, Pam held him in her arms. Although the sadness was deep, Pam shared that an equally deep healing took place in her life. It turned out that the thing that motivated Pam to help others was that her son had been murdered ten years before. Her son died alone, with no one to hold him. Now, in reaching out in service and love, Pam had been given the opportunity to give the gift to someone else that had been denied her son. She held the dying boy as he passed from this life to the next.

So when I tell you we had hot dogs at the home of Dick and Pam Klein with those six Muslim children who had been orphaned, I want you to know there was a lot more going on than just a little back yard cookout. That same woman, Pam Klein, and the whole Jewish community joined with a group of Christian and Muslim women, men, and children, in an interfaith work project. There was a big community day and all over Houston men and women and boys and girls were doing service projects to help share God's love. Pam's group made lap quilts for seniors. There was great joy as people of faith, people of different faiths, worked together to help others and make a difference in their community. Then when the work project was over, Pam came to our church for dinner. It just so happened that her husband Dick had made up his own work project. Dick had his own idea how to do something kind for others. That Sunday night, Dick Klein, our dear Jewish friend, was at our church cooking hot dogs for a group of Presbyterians. That was his way of serving. And I want to tell you, a hot dog never tasted better. In some ways those hot dogs were a taste of heaven. They were a taste of heaven right here on earth.

The first Easter we were with you here at Dunn's Corners the children had their Easter Egg Hunt. The weather was bad so they all crammed into this very sanctuary and they had an indoor Easter Egg Hunt. Mimi Yu filmed that Easter Egg Hunt and then posted it in high speed. The hunt lasted quite a while, but on her video it goes by in a blur with kids running and looking and finding and smiling and laughing and holding their prize. What if we could do something similar? What if we could make a film about a year in the life of this church? Instead of high speed, what if we could place scene upon scene upon scene and just let the picture build and grow? If we put a whole year up, it wouldn't be anything near to what heaven will be like. But it sure would be a taste of heaven, a small vision of heaven.

In worship we would have banners our kids made for Lent, and banners for the Kirkin' of the Tartan, and banners for Christmas and Easter and the Lord's Supper and Pentecost. We would have the organ and the piano and drums and bells and brass and children and adults. We would have robes and dance costumes and kilts and bagpipes. We would have a wide representation of our congregation standing in this pulpit as over the course of the year and Sunday mornings and Wednesday Vespers numerous ones read and pray and share testimonies and preach and invite. We would have a precious friend sharing her gift of signing, communicating the gospel story with the movements of her hands. There would be some standing at the baptismal font, some gathered at this Table, some ushering, and some offering. There would be weddings. There would be memorial services. In this very room we would rejoice with those who rejoice and we would weep with those who weep. We would bring fruits and vegetables to set this table for Thanksgiving. We would wheel in canned goods and non-perishable items and take them to Jonnycake and to Veterans. You would smell pancakes cooking and see our Diamonds group gathered to share lunch. There would be Scouts on Wednesday and Youth Fellowship on Tuesday and the Art Group on Friday and the choir on Thursday and Fellowship on Sunday and Warm Shelter dinners on Saturday. On a Monday the Presbyterian Women would be wrapping cookie cans or planning soup fundraisers On Tuesdays a group of men would be going through the checklist of all the items we need to take care of with our buildings and grounds. There would be Angel Trees and Mitten Trees and Reverse Offerings and Special Offerings and Habitat work teams. There would be a tag sale that would knock your socks off. You would see members of the community gather for a Christmas Day Dinner, a dinner open to anyone and to everyone. Our children would be here for ELC and GPS and VBS and if you don't know what those initials stand for well then raise your hand and ask and before you know it we'll have you working right alongside so many others who love children and youth. And just when you don't think we

could fit one more thing into this picture there would be a Christmas Bazaar. Buckle your seat belt, because you are going to see cookies coming in and baskets being made and crafts and jewelry and knitting and drawing and painting and stitching and quilting (see, I distinguished correctly, naming both quilting and kilting), a wide array of artists who all share their gifts with a joyful heart, a dinner and servers and then a clean up crew to put it all back together.

Layer upon layer of worship and prayer, frame by frame the life of a church where people learn and love and witness and grow and where the deepest friendships are formed, where life's challenges are faced and sacred stories are embraced. Someday we will all get to heaven. Jesus will roll back the clouds and say, "I've got this." He will create new heavens and a new earth. While we eagerly wait for that glorious day, he has given us talents and treasures, he has given us hearts and minds and voices, he has given us an example of how to bring a little bit of heaven on earth. He'll take care of heaven. That much is for sure. He's got that one. But today he is at work on this earth, in human lives. And he is calling us, each one of us, every single one of us, all of us, to lend a hand, to open our hearts, to share his love.