

“Creating New Heavens and a New Earth”
Based on Isaiah 65: 17-25
by Rev. Meghan Davis
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Last week, I preached on the Beatitudes found in Luke’s Gospel. As we were celebrating All Saint’s Sunday, my sermon focused on the Beatitudes in light of All Saint’s and how we might remember and honor our loved ones who are no longer with us. But after worship, I was disturbed by something that I did not address. The scripture included the verses, “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.”¹ For centuries, this passage has been misused by abusers and oppressors of all kinds as a tool for their abuse. This passage has been used to pacify and control victims of abuse and oppression, by telling people that God wants them to love their oppressors and that they will be blessed in the after life. This scripture has been used by the rich to convince the poor to forfeit their own wellbeing for that of the rich.

But when Jesus says to love your enemies and do good to those who hate you and pray for those who abuse you, to turn the other cheek, this is meant to empower the abused, not the abusers. It’s meant as a strategy for situations that cannot be changed, not as an excuse to remain in a bad situation that can and should be changed. Nothing is more disconcerting to an oppressor than being stood up to. Nothing throws off the powers of hate like the power of love. God does not want people to stay in abusive situations they can get out of. God does not want people manipulated by others and God certainly does not want scripture interpreted in such a way as to enable abusers and oppressors in the world. God does not want anyone to manipulate you to sacrifice your own wellbeing for that of another. God offers a new way, new heavens and a new earth in which weeping and abuse are not only eradicated, but completely forgotten. And that is the promise which today’s scripture addresses.

Today’s scripture from the book of Isaiah is believed to have been written around the time of the end of the Babylonian exile. During the exile, the ruling elite of Israel sought an explanation for their situation. And the answer they found was that they had been unfaithful to YHWH. They had turned their backs on God, they had lived their lives according to their wills rather than God’s. They believed that the exile was their punishment for their lack of faith and dependence on God. After about seventy years in Babylon, this section of Isaiah reflects the hopefulness and optimism of Israel as they anticipated their return to Jerusalem—as they anticipated an opportunity to start afresh in Jerusalem and in their lives with God.

¹ Luke 6: 27-31

In today's scripture, God promises *shalom* to the people. *Shalom* is peace but not only peace as in "the opposite of war and violence," but a peace signifying wholeness, well-being, and prosperity. YHWH promises to create new heavens and a new earth. The sin and suffering of the past will not only be over but they will be forgotten. Can this be a good thing, to forget all the former things? We know from modern psychology that it is impossible to forget the terrible events of our lives and if we do suppress such memories, usually they reappear in our lives in unwelcome and destructive ways. But in this new reality, in the new heavens and earth this erasure of memory is a good thing, a sign of *shalom*. The memories of the sin and suffering will be replaced with rejoicing. God will create this new Jerusalem as a joy and invites us to rejoice as well. No more will there be weeping. No more will there be cries of distress. No more will there be infants that live only a few days but we will all live long and full lives. In God's new reality no longer will one people be taken advantage of by another. Those who build houses and plant vineyards will reap the benefits of their labor. In stark contrast to the old way, when God's faithless people failed to call upon God and therefore God did not respond, now God will answer the people before they even call. "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent-its food shall be dust!"

Theologian Nelson Rivera notes that, "The announcement that everything will pass is a word of judgment. However," he continues, "judgment is never God's last, or definitive word. The word as promise is what has come to stay. The promise is the possibility of everything becoming new. The word as promise creates the vision and its realization, as well as the very faith that is needed in order to believe it in the first place. The word of God is very powerful indeed. It is capable of doing the most difficult thing of all: creating anew out of what is very old. This is not creation out of nothing; this is creation out of the chaos of human endeavors, of spoiled nature, and of everything in between."²

Peace and harmony will be restored to God's creation, an indication of a return to the *shalom* of the Garden of Eden before the fall. But this is not a complete reversal, not a do-over starting back at the Garden of Eden, but a new Jerusalem. This new reality of the new heavens and new earth exist in God's city. Centuries after these words of scripture were written, this vision of the new heavens and earth will be alluded to in early Christianity in the book of Revelation where the writer states, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband."³

² Nelson Rivera, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 292.

³ Revelation 21: 1-2

At first glance, we might see today's passage as a utopian vision of something that can never, will never come to pass. Perhaps we get the impression that the present reality will be utterly destroyed, for God to start all over with a clean slate, as in the story of Noah and the flood. But there is no destruction in this vision and there is no unattainability. "Rather," as one commentator puts it, "it is about building upon the original creation that the Divine called good. It is about transforming that creation into something new."⁴

Most of us don't live like we believe it. We don't live like we believe that God can—or at least, will—bring about this new heavens and new earth. Maybe we doubt God's ability to create new heavens and a new earth because it hasn't been done yet. After all, this scripture was written over two and a half millennia ago and it doesn't seem that this utopia has come to pass yet, so why should we believe it? In ancient Greek theatre there was a device called the "*deus ex machina*" which literally means the machine of the gods. The *deus ex machina* was literally a machine by which actors playing gods would be flown in at the end of a play to fix everything so the play could end happily when there was no other possible way to resolve it happily. And so far, we haven't seen God swoop in and fix it all yet, so it's easy to think that God can't, or won't, deliver on these promises of new heavens and a new earth.

Or maybe we sometimes we forget that God actually does have the capacity to create the new heavens and earth we hear about in scripture. We get wrapped up in our own lives, we look at our present reality and we lose sight of the mystery and miracles around us. We are so focused on our own capabilities that we overlook God's capacity to transform the world and the universe. And why shouldn't we believe that God can do new and amazing things in the world? If we believe that God is the Creator of the universe, surely God has the ability to re-create and transform this very Creation.

What would this new earth look like without weeping, suffering, death at a young age, violence and oppression? Can you imagine it? As Mary Eleanor Johns of Pittsburgh Seminary notes, "We may not know how God means to transform the universe, but we can confess that we know it is in God's power to do this." She adds, "What remains possible for the single believer, the single congregation, is to do the work involved in such transformation by following the patterns of mercy that Christ has laid out for us."⁵

We see God's new heavens and new earth breaking through throughout history. We see God's work when peace comes to war-torn parts of the world, as oppressive systems of slavery and apartheid are abolished. Just yesterday, we saw God's reign breaking through in the long overdue release in Burma of the political prisoner Aung San Suu Kyi. But of course these big and monumental events are not

⁴ Mary Eleanor Johns, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 290.

⁵ *Ibid*, 292.

the only ways God's Reign shines through and we see glimpses of the new heavens and earth.

Transformation of creation starts with us. Transformation starts with each of us individually—with you and with me. Because the promise in today's text is not only a promise from God to fix what is broken and restore and recreate but also provides hope for the future. It is also an invitation for God's people to be involved and active in the restoration.

Jesus' life and ministry is our model of how this transformation works: his radical inclusivity, his commands to love our neighbor, to love our enemies, his concern for healing the sick, and caring for the poor. Everything we do in our efforts of loving our neighbors and spreading *shalom* is our way of recreating the heavens and earth with God. Everything we do to love and care for God's beloved children helps the new heaven and earth break into our present reality. As Mary Eleanor Johns writes, "We are able to give one drink of cold water at a time. We are able to bring comfort to the poor and the wretched, one act of mercy or change at a time. One book given, one friendship claimed, one covenant of love, one can of beans, one moment of commendation, one confession of God's presence but for the asking, one moment in which another person is humanized rather than objectified, one challenge to the set order that maintains injustice, one declaration of the evil that is hiding in plain sight, one declaration that every person is a child of God: these acts accumulate within God's grace."⁶

Our participation in this creation of a new heavens and new earth is not only to about claiming our piece of the new reality but as a way of strengthening and building our relationship with God. We do so not to earn or purchase our piece of the new heaven and earth, but as our thankful response to God's promise of grace, a promise which will not come to fruition in some far-off future but is now and always has been breaking into our present reality.

Because, as one commentator notes, "We're in this kingdom business for the long haul. Our hope is animated with Isaiah's vision of justice and peace and rooted in the tough reality of Jesus' call to endure."⁷ We know that God is in it for the long haul and that means we are, too. So we keep chipping away at war in the world, until all war is replaced with peace. We continue to chip away at economic injustice until no one labors in vain, we continue to chip away at hunger, homelessness and poverty until everyone has a safe shelter and plenty of nutritious food to eat. We do rejoicing in the confidence and hope that God gives us as God announces, "Behold, I am creating new heavens and a new earth."

⁶ Mary Eleanor Johns, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 292.

⁷ Kyle Childress, "Reflections on the Lectionary," *The Christian Century* November 2, 2010, p. 21.