

November 17 2019

Isaiah 65:17-25

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 for ever
in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
and its people as a delight.
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.
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.
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;
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.
They shall not labour in vain,
or bear children for calamity;
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—
and their descendants as well.
Before they call I will answer,
while they are yet speaking I will hear.
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.

Luke 21:5-19

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, 'As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.'

They asked him, 'Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?' And he said, 'Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and, "The time is near!" Do not go after them.

'When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.' Then he said to them, 'Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

'But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.

SERMON:

(Begin by building a block tower while speaking.)

A sermon teacher I have reminds me to always keep this question in mind: What's the problem this scripture is addressing? What's going on for the community of readers that needs attention?

What is the problem in the community of readers that the author of this scripture is addressing?

I think that's a relevant question for our texts today.

Isaiah's people are living in exile, they've experienced the destruction of Jerusalem, they have lost everything. Every stone has been knocked down. It was a bleak existence for them, one with little hope for new life and a restored place of community.

The early readers of Luke's gospel were living about 50 years after Jesus' death, their beloved temple was destroyed a decade before this gospel was written. While those listening to Jesus looked at that building, adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, the readers of the gospel saw only rubble.

And so it may be with some of us - we may have lives that we are building. Beautiful lives, adorned with beautiful stones - healthy families, meaningful careers - lives we dedicate to God.

And others of us... *(knock over tower)*. Well, others of us may feel like our lives are in ruins, broken in various ways, or crumbling around the edges.

Our passage from Isaiah begins:

For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind. (Is. 65: 17)

New things - new everything. New earth; new heavens. For those who have nothing, newness may be soothing, hopeful words to hear. Isaiah maps out a world unimaginable - long life, abundance in every way. So many promises...

But whether we have little, like those in exile, or we have lives that feel full and blessed, uncertainty can be unsettling and sometimes downright terrifying. What happens when we don't want new things?

In the stories of Exodus, the Israelites, recently freed from slavery under Pharaoh, begged to go back to Egypt, to the land, the life they knew. They wanted security over freedom. Not some new thing that was full of unknowns.

Here, in our reading from Isaiah, the Israelites have been living in a foreign land - everything lost - their land, their people - can they trust in a new thing that isn't just one more bad thing?

Isaiah was given a vision for what lay ahead for his people - a vision none of them could see. A vision of the peaceable kingdom - of a new Jerusalem, a rebuilt Jerusalem.

So different from our gospel reading! Here Jesus speaks of a very different 'new thing' that is coming. His is not one where the lion and the lamb lie down together, but one of Wars and Destruction.

This new thing is not what anyone wants to hear.

Nation will rise against nation; kingdom against kingdom. Famines, plagues... it's all coming.

But first, even before all of that, first comes your own persecution. They will arrest you and throw you in prison.

Indeed, the words of Isaiah

For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.

These words have a new meaning. The new thing Jesus talks about doesn't hold much good news. Sounds terrifying.

And what does Jesus tell his followers?

Jesus' response deserves our careful attention, for in the midst of the destruction he speaks of, he offers instruction.

The first piece of instruction he offers is in verse 8: 'beware, don't be led astray'. Don't go after them. *Stay rooted in me*, in my teachings. And then, when you hear of wars, don't be terrified. *Stay rooted in me*, these things must take place. But... he says... but before the world comes crashing down around you, before all of that, you will suffer. You will be betrayed by parents, brothers, sisters, your faith community. Some will even be put to death.

But don't be terrified! No, this is an opportunity to testify!

His third instruction: don't prepare your defense.

Don't be led astray; don't be terrified; don't prepare your defense - for I will give you words and a wisdom that no one will withstand.

Bad things are coming, expect it. Jesus doesn't offer any of the good news Isaiah foretold. No sugar coating what awaits them.

And how does this passage end?

But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls. You simply need to endure.

By your endurance you will gain your souls can also be read 'by your endurance you will gain your LIFE'. Life with a capital L. Life that cannot be taken from you. Life that you're terrified of losing. That's the new thing that is here.

So what does it mean for us to endure? To endure means to suffer without breaking. At its root, to endure means to harden, to remain solid and steadfast.

I turned to a couple of ultra long distance runners I know and asked them about endurance - how they prepare for crazy long races.

Two things came to the surface - one was to have a plan and stick to it. Stay focused, don't be led astray. Endurance is built over time - it takes disciplined work, be ready. The second was to be mentally ready- that's key. While disciplining the body is essential, so is preparing the mind, because suffering is a part of these events. Staying focused, remaining grateful and welcoming the hardships, because they will come. And the one friend sent me a link about Camille Herron. Have you heard of her? Wow. Talk about endurance! Last December Camille set a new world record, running 162.9 miles in 24 hours, setting new 100-mile and 24-hour world records. How did she do it? Well the Taco-Bell double decker taco and a beer 21 hours into the race were key to finishing strong, but she said 'every picture of me shows me smiling. I really had this whole joy with what I was doing, embracing (it)'.¹ She vomited several times during the race, but she found joy along the way. She was committed to a vision, enduring, with joy.

"By your endurance you will gain your souls; gain your Life" Jesus told his followers.

Jesus seems to be saying: Watch me - I'm going to endure all these things first. Pay attention, don't be led astray. I am rooted in God, I am solidly linked to our Creator. I have prepared for this. He knows that those listening will be the ones to turn on him, to betray him. He knows he's about to pick up his cross. Suffering and love and Jesus' way. And yet that's not the end. To endure, you need to stay rooted in me Jesus is telling his listeners, telling us.. Hold fast to me, your Rock and your Redeemer. I am the rock that cannot be torn down.

What does it mean for us to endure?

God is present in our world, present in your life, my life, even when things have gotten so bad that it feels like the world as we know it is crashing down around us. Jesus reminds us he came that we may have life and have it abundantly. Oh my friends, the journey is long. By your endurance you will gain Life . Hold on to the rock.

Here is the link to watch this sermon online.

<https://youtu.be/29OaxYq8FAQ>

¹ <https://www.runnersworld.com/runners-stories/a25586230/ultrarunner-camille-herron-taco-bell/>