

Making All Things New—Isaiah 65:17-25
Oklahoma City University – Chapel Service
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I have to admit—I have an addiction. And no, I don't mean a 'good' addiction that most of us like to compare amongst one another. Like, for example, an addiction to books, which I also have. No this addiction is much less noble and much more frequent. I am, of course speaking of my addiction to Sonic. I mean, who can't resist a restaurant claiming to have over 168,000 different drink combinations? Despite numerous vows to 'Sonic celibacy,' my wife, Bonnie and I both seem to find a way or an excuse to make a Sonic run at least once or twice a week. Indeed, it is not uncommon for Bonnie to call me around 5:00 on her way home from work asking to get her a cherry Sprite. And of course I go—if there's one thing I learned from 5 months of marriage it's that I never say no to a request for after work refreshment, especially when she is the one who brings home the money. So I go and order her cherry Sprite and of course I wouldn't want her to drink something all by herself so I order something to, and so on and so forth. Needless to say we both like Sonic.

Recently, both Bonnie and I made one of our routine Sonic-runs. When we got there I noticed a piece of paper stuck on the menu right above the button I had to push to order. I looked a little closer and I got really interested when I saw that it said, "The Most Important Question in the World." So, I picked it up and unfolded it. I then discovered it was one of those tracts that some people give out. You know the tracts about how to become a Christian and what one should do or believe to be a Christian, or least what one should do or believe in order to become a particular kind Christian that particular tract described. Anyway, I looked it over and the question it was talking about, this so-called "most important question" was this: "If you died tonight, where would you go?" Then further down it said, "If your answer isn't heaven, keep reading." So, I kept reading. Not that that was my answer, I was just curious. So, I kept reading and this tract had a long list of probably nine or ten things that I needed to do or believe in order to become a "Christian." The ultimate goal of course was to escape this evil and wretched world and to go to heaven. The impression I got from reading the tract was that all Christianity amounted to was sitting around and biding my time until was zapped out of this world. I remember thinking to myself: Is this the impression people have of Christianity? Is this what the peaceful, gracious and compassionate way of Jesus has been reduced to? Nothing more than insurance of eternal life off somewhere else after one dies? Then I looked and saw that there was a tract just like the one I had found on every single menu.

In our text today from II Isaiah, we see a description of what new heaven and a new earth might look like. And at first glance, most Christians in the buckle of the Bible belt would assume that Isaiah is talking about something in the future, indeed something after death, something we can hope for, but will never see in our lifetime, a lofty dream, but something we can never help realize. A closer examination however proves otherwise. Isaiah, a contemporary of Micah and a prophet from the big city of Jerusalem,

is preaching to the God's people, the Hebrews, likely during the Babylonian exile. The exiles had grown tired and weary, fearing that God had neglected and forgotten them. Isaiah steps in and offers hope and promise in the face of oppression and injustice.

Indeed in our text today Isaiah's oracles have reached their triumphal climax like the final act in a play Isaiah's prophecies have reached their zenith. Eugene Peterson's translation reads like this:

Pay close attention now:

I'm creating new heavens and a new earth.

All the earlier troubles, chaos, and pain
are things of the past, to be forgotten.

Look ahead with joy.

Anticipate what I'm creating:

I'll create Jerusalem as sheer joy,
create my people as pure delight.

I'll take joy in Jerusalem,
take delight in my people:

No more sounds of weeping in the city,
no cries of anguish;

No more babies dying in the cradle,
or old people who don't enjoy a full lifetime;

One-hundredth birthdays will be considered normal—
anything less will seem like a cheat.

For my people will be as long-lived as trees,
my chosen ones will have satisfaction in their work.

They won't work and have nothing come of it,
they won't have children snatched out from under them.

For they themselves are plantings blessed by God,
with their children and grandchildren likewise God-blessed.

Before they call out, I'll answer.

Before they've finished speaking, I'll have heard.

Wolf and lamb will graze the same meadow,
lion and ox eat straw from the same trough,
Neither animal nor human will hurt or kill
anywhere on my Holy Mountain," says God.

Such words are comforting in our age of war and polarization, but Isaiah's message was much more than lofty idealism, more than excessive hyperbole and more than dreamy pie-in-sky rhetoric that only church-folks fantasize of in the after-life. The message Isaiah brought to the exiles was tangible, something real, that could actually be attained, through transformation of their relationship with God. Indeed, Isaiah evoked those ancient words of creation: "Behold, I will create a new and heaven and a new earth." Isaiah proclaimed renewal and restoration, healing and re-creation of the entire

cosmos, salvation not just for a righteous remnant, but all who respond to God's grace. Isaiah's words are echoed by John in Revelation chapter 21: "See I am making all things new." An ongoing restorative process of re-creation.

Friends, as human beings created in the image of God, as persons who bear the divine spark of inspiration, we are co-creators with God, co-partners in God's divine effort, to renew the face of the earth. We have been empowered and enabled, to participate in God's salvific process of recapitulation, a process of making all things new.

As we approach Thanksgiving and the holiday season where we so often count our blessings let us not forget that in addition to counting our blessings we should count the ways in which we are being generous; the ways we are tangibly participating in God's process of re-creation. Upon counting those ways of generosity, I think we will discover those potential areas of improvement where we could do better than we have. As Americans we have been so blessed, and as Christians we must realize that we are blessed not to store up things for ourselves, but to be blessed and help others, to be generous as we partner with God in restoration, healing and renewal. Perhaps the question we should ask ourselves this thanksgiving season is: How can I be more generous? How can I more fully participate in God's divine process of re-creation? I think we will all find that we can do more. We can all give something.

This is tough at least it is for me. And when I began to slip into the Western American illusion that I can't possibly give more than I already have. When I began to think that I am entitled to something, or that my "wants" trump others "needs." When I slip into that line of thinking. I remember that in the eyes of the rest of the world I am so rich, because the rest of the world suffers at the expense of my wants and comforts. I remember that in reality, we in the United States comprise only 6% of the world's population yet we consume over 40% of the world's resources. I remember that 1 billion people—1/6 of the population—don't have access to clean water. I remember that on Thanksgiving while I am celebrating, stuffing myself with turkey and cranberry sauce, on that day alone, some 800 million people, including 300 million children will go hungry. When I think I just don't have enough "things" or enough "stuff" to fill my apartment, I remember that half of the world's population, some 3 billion people, live on less than \$2 day. And most sobering of all, I remember that according to experts, \$20 billion would provide clean water and basic nutrition to the world's population—that same amount of money Americans spend each year on ice cream.

When confronted with those stark realities, I sometimes have to reevaluate my priorities remembering that as a Christian I make the audacious claims that another world is possible, not only that another world is possible, but as Isaiah claimed, that world is on its way, and through my interactive, synergetic participation and cooperation with God I can help make that world a reality:

A world where war and violent coercion are not accepted as normative forms of public policy, but are repudiated and disparaged; a world where poverty no longer plagues the globe and the bellies of every man, woman, and child are filled; a world where disease and genocide are no longer headlines on the evenings news, but past memories of former things; a world where domination and greed no longer guide the

behavior of countries and individuals, but are rejected as destructive and anti-human; a world where oppressive ideologies such imperialism, nationalism, classism, sexism, racism and all the other –isms no longer dominate our behavior; a world where the church allows itself to be the church rather allowing itself to remain a detached bureaucratic institution irrelevant to our contemporary situations; a world where God’s peaceable kingdom is being intentionally built by Christians everywhere; a world where Christians are so committed and dedicated to the words “...thy kingdom come thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” that they can’t help but put those words into action.

Jesus proclaimed the coming of this world, indeed Jesus proclaimed that this world was already among us and was already within us. I wonder, do we realize what we’re capable of? Do we realize our potential? The disciples in the gospels often didn’t and yet Jesus left his entire movement in their hands. And look what happened, they changed the course of human history. Jesus had faith in his disciples, as clueless as they may have been, and Jesus has faith in us, as clueless and oblivious as we may be at times.

Well, so what? There is nothing new under the sun and everything I’ve said up to this point you’ve likely heard before. Why should we do anything about it? Why does any of this matter? As I was preparing this message earlier this week I began to ask myself that very question: so what? And I did something I do a lot when I’m thinking—I took the dog out for a walk. And as I was walking the dog I noticed something I hadn’t ever noticed before. I walk the dog everyday—well, I try to everyday sometimes we don’t make it. And everyday we go through the same routine. We walk around the same place, with the same scenery, and the same landmarks. I know this and the dog knows this, she knows where to turn and where to stop and so on and so forth. What I noticed was this: everyday, even though we’re about to go through the same routine, she is just as excited as she ever was. And as we are walking she seizes the moment, exploring everything she can just as if she had never seen it before. Just as if it were for the first time. I think I can learn a few things from my dog.

Now I know my dog can’t rationally comprehend the problems of life like we do. I know she isn’t capable of making a reasoned moral decision or capable of completely understanding the consequences of her actions. I know she doesn’t operate at the same level of consciousness as I do. I know all of that. But I still wonder if on a certain level, this isn’t unlike our relationship with God. I am faithful—for the most part—to walk the dog. And because I am faithful she is faithful and she seizes the moment for what it is, excited for the opportunity to be alive. Friends, God has been, is, and will always be faithful. Each time we worship we read the ancient stories of God’s faithfulness. Because God is faithful we are empowered, indeed we are freed to be faithful in our actions. So, when we are faced with the question: so what? How can I actually make a difference? Perhaps we should remember that as Mother Teresa once said, “God doesn’t call us to be successful, God calls us to be faithful.” When faced with the adversity and hopelessness, when faced with the so what question, Mother Teresa remained faithful.

What would have happened if, say, Rosa Parks, stopped with the so what question? What would have happened if Martin Luther King Jr. or Ghandi, questioned

whether they could actually make a difference and quit? What would have happened if Nelson Mandela, after spending a quarter century in prison, questioned what he could actually do decided to do nothing? What would have happened if Jesus, faced with the oppression of the Roman Empire, succumbed to the so what question? To me, part of what makes Jesus Jesus is that even when faced with these questions, indeed even when faced with imminent death, he remained faithful and responsive to God's grace. As Christians, we believe in following Jesus' lead. We make the audacious and outrageous claims that it is better to be faithful than "successful." And even more revolutionary, we believe that in the process, we can help transform that status quo and change the world. We believe that through the transformation of our relationship with God, that we can indeed make a difference, one person and one relationship at a time in our small corner of reality. We have the audacity as Christian to believe we have the power to do that, to follow in Jesus' footsteps. Do you believe that? Do you really believe that?

In our increasingly polarized and divided world it is sometimes tough to see the hope in all this. It is in those times, I believe, that Scripture can be most illuminating. And the fact that at times, the situations in scripture so closely resemble our current situations never ceases to amaze me. Just earlier this week I was reading Paul's letter to the Galatians and I came across that beautiful passage where he states, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." I wonder how Paul might articulate that passage were he living today; I wonder to whom it might be directed.

Perhaps that passage today might read like this:

There is no Christian or Muslim, American or Iraqi; there is no longer liberal or conservative, progressive or evangelical, democrat or republican; there is no longer terrorist or freedom fighter, pacifist or just-war theorist; there is no longer pro-life or pro-choice, gay or straight, rich or poor for we are all one in Christ Jesus, one in the Spirit.

What would happen if we actually believed that? What would happen if we recognized the interdependence and inter-relatedness of all humans? What would happen if we answered the call and responded to God's grace participating in the restoration and renewal of all things? What would happen if we actually became Christians? In the name of Creator, our Redeemer and our Sustainer, Amen.