

Isaiah 65: 17-25
2 Thessalonians 2: 13-17
Luke 21: 5-19

A New Earth
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Some of you may remember Star Trek – the *old* Star Trek, with those 60’s hairdos and shots of that little model of the starship zooming by, and the voice of William Shatner saying, “Our mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before.” Nowadays, I often think about the little communicators carried by the crew members of the starship enterprise. They seemed like magic at the time, but now my smartphone can do lots more than they ever did. Starfleet communications technology has become...kind of ordinary. We have GPS, we have Siri to help us out. Science fiction was prophetic, then, and we don’t even think about many of the miracles that surround us today.

Today we heard what is known as prophetic scripture: Isaiah’s words about a utopian vision of Jerusalem and Jesus’ words about destruction, suffering and faith. Predictions of a sort – but how can we read them? I think of the little kids in Sunday School and the babies we baptized today. I ask myself, how can we explain these strange passages to them?

Anybody who reads or listens to the news hears predictions. Here are some predictions from our recent history, all from people who knew what they were talking about. Said by the chairman of IBM in 1943: "I think there is a world market for maybe five computers." Written in Popular Mechanics magazine in 1949 about ENIAC, the Electronic Numerical Integrator And Computer, the first computer: "Where a calculator on the ENIAC is equipped with 18,000 vacuum tubes and weighs 30 tons, computers in the future may have only 1,000 vacuum tubes and weigh only 1.5 tons." Said by the inventor Lee DeForest: "While theoretically and technically television may be feasible, commercially and financially it is an impossibility."

Well, time has passed and we find these predictions comical, or signs of how fast technology moves. Some people would relegate biblical predictions to the same category: comical or outdated. Isaiah wrote about a Jerusalem where the sound of weeping or distress would not be heard. When has **that** ever happened? By contrast, Jesus’ words give us a chilling sense of déjà vu. Wars and insurrections, famine and disease – when has humanity **ever** been free of these things? As I have said before, I take the Bible seriously, not literally. Something is being taught us, not only about the past, not only about the future, but about our place in the world, today.

When the passage from Isaiah was written, it was a generation or two after the Babylonian exiles had returned. They returned to a city of rubble. The Temple had been destroyed and the population decimated. The reality before their eyes could not be more different from “Jerusalem as a city of joy,” or “the people as a delight.” But since they needed to start over, they needed a new template, a new creation as inspiration. They needed to know that God had something else in store. So the prophet speaks for God, describing what life would be like: happy children, long lives, secure homes. Even enemies in the animal kingdom will find a way to co-exist. A New Earth. These words were written in the midst of the rubble of war, and they have served to call faithful people in every age to remember the divine intention for the good of all.

When the passage from Luke was written, it was a generation or two after the life of Jesus. The Jews had risen up against the Romans, and received a devastating defeat. The City of Jerusalem had been destroyed, again, and the Romans had demolished the Temple. Luke remembers that Jesus spoke of the impermanence of this great edifice, and the possibility of coming disaster. These words were also written in the midst of the rubble of war, and they have given us a very different calling, a different word of hope.

In the time of Jesus, it was easy to be impressed with the Temple that King Herod had built. It was enormous. The smallest stones in the building weighed 2 to 3 tons. Many of them weighed 50 tons. Kind of like an old computer, I guess. ☺ Some of the stones of the temple foundation remain as the “Wailing Wall.” The largest existing stone is more than 12 yards long and 3 yards high, and it weighed hundreds of tons. The stones didn’t need mortar or any other binding material between them. Stability was achieved by the great weight of the stones themselves. The walls towered over Jerusalem, over 400 feet in one area. Inside the four walls there were 45 acres of bedrock: the mountain had been shaved flat so that huge crowds could fit inside the Temple grounds. I doubt that we have any gathering place like it, even today.

So when Jesus and the disciples walked out of the Temple in Jerusalem and Jesus looked back at the Temple and predicted, "Do you see all these great buildings. Not one stone will be left on another," it sounded a little crazy. The destructive effort required to tear it down, or the desire to tear it down was unimaginable. In Luke’s time, though, it was already history. In the Scriptures, we encounter that space where interpretation of prophecy and interpretation of history overlap and blend. So we have to tread carefully and deliberately through these passages.

Many people over the centuries have tried to understand Jesus' teachings in this passage, and many have tried to apply his words to specific, usually contemporary, events. I believe such attempts to be misguided, partly because they can lead to an encouragement of (or even a kind of celebration of) the very disasters they predict. Some Christians see unrest in the Middle East as a sign of the coming Battle of Armageddon. No matter that the actual Battle of Armageddon or Megiddo happened in 609 BC. There are those who believe that Jesus will appear at the head of a righteous army, sword in hand, and they want to provoke or hasten that event. For them, promoting peace in the Middle East is pointless. They don’t seem to have read the verse in Luke that says when “many come in Jesus’ name and say ‘the time is near,’ **Do not go after them.**”

But if we see these passages as addressing the reality of their time, perhaps we can see our Christian calling a little differently. Troubles will come, to us and to others. As Jesus says, “This will give you an opportunity to testify’ – in other words to speak the truth. We look for signs of the times: signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, wars and insurrections, earthquakes. The economy. The environment. Terrorism. The election. Some of these signs are part of cycles of history beyond our understanding; some may even be personal. Stages of lives and civilizations end sometimes. We think it is the end of the world. But it is not the end of the entire world: just the end of that particular stage of our world. We enter a new one, a new earth.

Even though the future is mysterious, **now** is a time for us to help clarify the moral issues that are at stake in our desire for a new creation. We testify to what is good and true, at the same time naming what is unacceptable and destructive. We testify to what we see, we testify to the

passing of the old order, and we testify to the vision of the kingdom. We testify to a vision of the new earth that will be inherited by our children and our children's children.

Testimony is both corporate and individual. My testimony will not be identical to yours. You will think of other examples: hurricanes in Haiti as an opportunity to relieve suffering, famine as an opportunity to feed the hungry, plagues as an opportunity to tend the sick, homelessness as an opportunity to build a house with Habitat for Humanity, the refugee crisis as an opportunity to welcome the stranger. You will think of other arenas to speak out against persecution or injustice, and some of them are quite close to home. Some will testify by wearing a safety pin on your lapel, declaring yourself an ally with members of marginalized, oppressed or bullied groups. You can testify by comforting a frightened child of color, as my daughter Elizabeth has been doing in a school library since Tuesday. We are called to make witness, to testify to God as this world changes, as lives and civilizations transform and pass on. We are called to prepare ourselves and to help prepare others for the new and better world to come, even as the troubles of the old world are evident around us.

There is no room in our testimony for violence, but there is also not much room for neutrality. Archbishop Desmond Tutu famously said, "If you are neutral in a situation of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has his foot on the tail of the mouse and you say you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality." Those people who wrote and read Luke's Gospel back in the first century had to make some hard choices in the face of persecution. They prayed for words and wisdom to confront the powerful forces of their time. We may pray for the same, and for the courage to take sides when we need to.

So, here I am, holding Isaiah's prophecy in one hand, and Jesus' in the other. And trying, as I said earlier, to take the Bible seriously, but not literally. I cannot make predictions about the future that will have much credibility. Fifteen years ago, I would not have predicted my apparent need for a laptop computer or a cell phone. I would not have predicted many things that are now part of my life and the reality of our national and international networks. I look to this church for purpose. The Church can teach us how to read Scripture and adapt to today's needs. How to change gracefully and purposefully. The practices of the church have always been associated with the inevitable changes in our lives that most of us go through: changes like birth, illness, marriage, death. The Church speaks words of blessing and grace during those moments of change, painful or joyous. It speaks words of challenge and resistance. And members of the church, true to Jesus' call, reach out their hands to testify without words.

All things will change, and God is making a new heaven and earth. A new beginning, a new opportunity, every day, as we follow the Holy One, who gives us words and wisdom. Amen.