

## The World as It Could Be

Isaiah 65:17-25

November 13, 2022

Rev. Scott Anderson

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.” (Isaiah 65:25)

These images from the prophet Isaiah are among the most precious in the Bible. But I confess that every time I hear them, I remember something Woody Allen once said. "On the day the wolf and the lamb lie down together," Allen quipped, "smart money will be on the wolf getting back up."

I also remember something Catholic scholar Gerard Sloyan once said: "The topic of peace brings out the banal in the preacher...After all, what can you say about peace except that it is a good idea? Sermons on the topic are consistently boring" (*Interpretation: John*, p. 177).

And yet it could also be argued that there is no more important topic, no more urgent priority, no more relevant moral imperative in the Bible than peace: the peace of the world, peace among nations, peace between human beings and nature in creation, peace among races, peace within nations and tribes and clans and families, peace between brothers and sisters, peace between human beings and God, and, finally, peace of heart—the peace of God which passes all understanding.

This week, the *New York Times* reported that the Pentagon now estimates that there have been a staggering 240,000 casualties in the Russian-Ukrainian War: 100,000 Russian soldiers killed or wounded matched by an equal number of Ukrainian soldiers, with an additional 40,000 civilians in Ukraine killed, innocent victims of war. And, this week, our country survived yet another bitterly contentious election, another kind of war, of sorts, on the home front, in a nation that remains deeply divided.

And, in the middle of all that news, can this ancient poetry leap off the page and come alive for us:

I am about to create new heavens and a new earth. . . .

For I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy. . .

No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it. . . .

No more . . . an infant that lives but a few days

or an old person who does not live out a lifetime. . . .

They shall build houses and inhabit them;

they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. . .

They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain (Isaiah 65:17-21, 25)

These words, which seem so terribly relevant in light of the news this week, are at least 2,500 years old. They have touched, in every age, the deepest human yearnings—for safety, security, home, and peace. They are striking words, because the story of human history is mostly the story of the absence of peace—the story of war, actually. War after war after war, preparation for war, battles fought and won, casualties of war, the aftermath of war, in every single age of human history, leading inexorably to the next war.

I suspect that many of us hear this soaring poetry of Isaiah about a new heaven and new earth at peace, and wonder “Can this be true? Is this kind of world real?” and we may whisper in our moments of honesty, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.”

Surely a prayer like that one formed on the lips of the returned Israelites as they stared around them at the ruins of their Jerusalem, which is the context of this section of Isaiah. It was not supposed to be that way. As a matter of fact, before they arrived, they had been overjoyed that the new Persian king, Cyrus, was allowing them to return to their holy land, ending their time in exile.

As they had made their way out of Babylon, they carried with them plans for rebuilding their nation. It would be just like before—but even better.

Yet when they finally arrived back home, things were not that simple. They saw destruction and devastation, the skeletons of war, scattered all around them. And among them, conflict and vindictiveness began to pick away at the promise. A sharp disconnect formed between the way things were and the way they were supposed to be. If we could listen underneath their conversations and laments, we might hear their whispered prayer, “Lord we believe; help our unbelief.”

Yet Isaiah asked them to doubt their doubts for a while, to suspend their disbelief, and to set aside their fear, even if it were only for a few moments. Then Isaiah stood right in the middle of their dashed hopes and dreams, right in the middle of the piled-up bodies and torn-down temple, and powerfully preached God’s poetry of hope, God’s challenging claims about making all things new.

A time in which grief and premature death are over. A time in which continued war and threats of war are finished. A time in which our kids aren’t always on hyper-alert for sounds of gunshots, a time when human decency returns to our body politic.

In this outrageous time of newness, Isaiah proclaims, even the wolf and the lamb will eat together, side by side, without enmity, without strife. And there will no longer be a sharp disconnect between the way things are and the way things are supposed to be. In this time of newness, our prayer will stop with “Lord, we believe.”

What does all of this sound like to you today? Does it sound like a passive “just wait—it will get better in the sweet-by-and-by?” Does it sound like a delusion, a cynical way of keeping us satisfied with the status quo? Does it sound like a naïve dream that cannot make a claim of truth in a post-Enlightenment world? Is that what it sounds like to you this day?

I’m sure that Isaiah’s community had some of those reactions. His poetic vision sounded outrageous to them, and it seemed to have nothing to do with the reality they saw displayed all around them. I am sure they found his poetry of hope difficult to swallow in the beginning, lovely rhetoric with no basis in reality.

Nevertheless, I also am willing to bet that God worked it so that, as Isaiah preached it, even the most cynical ones gathered around began to feel like it could be possible. God worked it so that, as Isaiah preached it, some of those imagination-exhausted folks began to see their lives cast in a more resiliently hopeful light. And then, I am willing to bet that God worked it so that, after Isaiah was done preaching it, when they all went back out into the world, they found themselves talking to each other about what Isaiah had said. Can it be true, they asked? Can it be true?

Then, by the grace of God, they decided they were going to choose to believe in what Isaiah proclaimed. But believing was not all they would do; they would act out of it, too. And acting out of those promises meant they would choose to live their lives, live as a faith community, actively practicing that hope-filled poetry out into the world.

That commitment to live out of and practicing Isaiah’s poetry of hope meant they would speak up and interfere whenever they saw injustice or hate.

Living out of and practicing that poetry of hope meant they would figure out how to feed the hungry and welcome the refugee, giving of their own resources, and advocating on behalf of those with no power. For they knew inequity and poverty are not stanzas in God’s poetry of hope.

Living out of and practicing that poetry of hope meant they would choose to treat one another with kindness even when politics got involved, trusting that as long as their hearts were one, their minds did not have to be. For they knew divisiveness and slander are not stanzas in God’s poetry of hope.

And the more that community talked about Isaiah’s vision and reflected on how it enlivened them and gave them courage, the more they decided that as a people of faith, part of their call was to proclaim the poetry of God’s hope out into the world in all that they said and in all that they did, even on those days when they still found themselves praying, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.”

Like Isaiah's community, we, too, have the God-given opportunity to be God's poets of newness for our world, certainly with our words, but also with our actions. We, too, have the God-given opportunity to declare in the middle of our own world which seems so frequently in chaos, "Behold, God is doing a new thing" and then letting that new thing inform how we choose to live our lives. Can you imagine being that kind of a witness? The kind of witness reflected in the poem "Continue," written by the late Maya Angelou:

My wish for you  
Is that you continue  
*Continue*  
To be who and how you are  
To astonish a mean world  
With your acts of kindness  
*Continue . . .*  
In a society dark with cruelty  
To let the people hear the grandeur  
Of God in the peals of your laughter  
*Continue*  
To let your eloquence  
Elevate the people to heights  
They had only imagined  
*Continue*  
To remind the people that  
Each is as good as the other  
And that no one is beneath  
Nor above you  
*Continue . . .*  
To put the mantel of your protection  
Around the bodies of  
The young and defenseless  
*Continue . . .*  
To let gratitude be the pillow  
Upon which you kneel to  
Say your nightly prayer  
And let faith be the bridge  
You build to overcome evil  
And welcome good  
*Continue . . .*  
(Maya Angelou, "Continue")

So, on this day, may we join our voices and our actions with all the poets of faith who have gone before us. And may we continue together until that day dawns when all prayers can finally and always just end with "Lord, I believe." Amen.