

Imagined, Not Yet Given

Isaiah 65:17-25

Rev. Dr. Benjamin J. Broadbent
The Community Church of Sebastopol, United Church of Christ
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I.

2500 years ago, the prophet known as Isaiah, composed an oracle for a divided and ambivalent people returning from exile in Babylon to the destroyed city of Jerusalem. Can these words speak a fresh and defiant to the church on this Sunday following the election?

Let it not be lost on us that we have designated today as “Gratitude Sunday,” the day on which we culminate the public phase of our Annual Appeal to enable our local congregation’s ministry and mission for 2017.

How to express gratitude when we as a church and as a people are so filled with ambivalence, even despair?

A pastor friend of mine said he wasn’t sure he’d be able to preach today he was so angry.

I think I understand him to mean that if preaching is the task of speaking God’s good news, perhaps preaching is impossible on a day when good news is hard to find.

Is there good news for us today? Can we muster up a bit of gratitude?

Maybe sometimes it’s enough to just go through the motions.

Mother Theresa said she would pray to God even when she didn’t feel God’s presence, and even when God’s absence lasted years and years.

“We the people” are now a collage of conflicted feelings.

Some are ecstatic with the outcome of the election, others simply satisfied.

They wanted change and they got it, including 1 in 5 voters in Sonoma County.

Many others are in shock. They did not see this coming. How could this happen?

Still others are grieving. Tears fell like rain this week, not the fabricated tears of poor losers, but the very real tears of those who feel they’ve loss something precious, the death of a values, dignity, integrity.

There are those who are defiant, using their middle finger to cast their second vote.

There are those who despair and are weighing the varied options of resignation, resilience, and resistance.

Some have concluded, reasonably, okay, this isn’t what we wanted, but this is what we got, and we need to make the most of it.

Others can't go there. Hell no, they say. This election season was traumatic, hateful, and destructive. How can we urge unity behind a person whose overall message was meant to divide and discriminate and dismiss?

We the people do not feel like a united "we" right now.

We are divided down the middle by ideology and allegiance.

Our division is made more complicated because almost half of people didn't even vote, and because, of the people who voted, most voted for the candidate that did not win.

This election doesn't just affect our country for the next four years, it potentially shapes our country for the next generation.

When my daughter Sophia said, "I want the girl to win," I told her, "It's gonna happen."

Instead, not only did the boy win, but a man-boy caricature of masculinity who is unashamed of his own chauvinism, arrogance, and prejudice, and who said some very ugly things about Muslims, Mexicans, and women.

"What happened?" my daughter, whose name means lady wisdom, asked.

"The boy won," I said, "again."

II.

Returning to Jerusalem, Isaiah heard the sound of weeping and braced himself against the cries of distress.

The returning Israelites were of a divided mind: Give up on Jerusalem and go elsewhere, or stay?

Among those who opted to stay and rebuild, there were those who wanted to restore the city's former glory, including the temple, as a way of recreating the past.

This was the party that wanted to, shall we say, "Make Jerusalem Great Again."

If we could just get back to the good ol' days before the exile, before the whole world got shaken up, before the reliable ways were called into question.

If we could just get back to the post-war years when America was on the up and up, when the white suburbs were thriving, the men all had jobs, the women knew their place, and the children were well-behaved.

Last spring I heard a late octogenarian say about the 1950's, "They were horrible. Horrible. Not for everyone, of course. But if you were a woman who wanted to live a larger life, the 1950's were horrible."

But the restoration party wasn't the only group of Israelites during Isaiah's time.

Others, upon returning to Jerusalem, noticed there were already people living there.

You see, when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and carried the people away, they didn't take everyone.

They took the established elites, the people in charge of the temple and the government and the centers of learning.
Remaining in Jerusalem were the poor folk who had to fend for themselves.
When elites, including Isaiah, returned, they knew they had a choice.
They could either return to the way things had been before, or they could enact a new compassion for those who had been left behind.
Isaiah, in his oracle, opts for a vision of Jerusalem in which God's full justice is brought to fruition.

III.

In a huge poetic act of imagination, Isaiah articulates the Jerusalem God intends. It is not Jerusalem in a bubble, but the outgrowth of a new cosmic order God is creating.
This new creation requires that the people let go of the former things, neither remembering nor calling them to mind.
Can you see Isaiah in the midst of the rubble of what was once the glorious city? Into the grief and the despair and the anger and the revulsion, he speaks audaciously in the voice of God, saying, "Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight."
God is personally invested in this vision, saying, "I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people."
Ever since the Exodus, God has been a softie for the people who suffer: "No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress."
Now Isaiah's god-intoxicated imagination finds its feet, gets practical about what this New Jerusalem will be like.
"No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days." In other words, every woman, regardless of income, will have excellent pre and post-natal care. There will be no "old person who does not live out a lifetime." Quality healthcare for every age will make all the difference. In Isaiah's imagination, if you're only 95 when you die, people will sigh and say, "Ah, and still so young."

Remembering pre-exile Jerusalem and its exploitation of the rural poor by the urban rich, Isaiah articulates God's agenda for jobs and the economy: "They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit."
There's a word in here for Sonoma County, if we're willing to hear it.
"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."
In other words, an economy based on many laborers working to increase the wealth of a few landowners is not a sustainable economy.

Isaiah envisions a Jerusalem in which people work hard and then enjoy the fruits of their labor, a Jerusalem where every child has the resources to thrive. In that Jerusalem, children will know they are loved and blessed, by God, and by the adults around them.

Pre-exile, there was a system of temple sacrifice wherein benefits were conferred upon those who supported the religious leadership.

It supposedly worked like this: you made an offering and, if God accepted it, your prayer would be answered.

In Isaiah's new oracle, God is imagined to be the giver of reliable gifts that are not rewards for sacrifice but a generous outpouring of God's own self.

"Before they call I will answer," God says, "while they are yet speaking I will hear."

This newly-created Jerusalem is a place of peace described familiarly:

"The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox."

Even venomous snakes, instead of biting the ankles of children and livestock, will eat the abundant dust on which they slither.

On this Sabbath, our first day of rest following the election, I'm not sure how to take Isaiah's oracle.

Is it good news, a premonition of things to come, or is it a pipe dream, great ideas that will never come pass?

Shall we rejoice at or bemoan the closing words of Isaiah's great poem?

"They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord."

IV.

I don't know. I want to say rejoice, but I'm not feeling it.

I want to bemoan, but I'm not yet ready to resign.

Isaiah has shared a vision that has been imagined, but not yet given.

It seems to me that days like this, days of uncertainty and division, are days when the church just might wake up to its vocation.

You see, we are recipients of this great counter-script known as the Bible.

Of course, the Bible contains a whole lot of ideological baggage, including patriarchy and xenophobia and violence.

But it also contains a constant, consistent counter-script that resists the totalizing narratives in its own pages as well as on the pages of our own unfolding history.

What I'm trying to say is that the church has resources for a day and a time such as this.

And our most precious resource is our tradition's counter-testimony that mobilizes the church to envision and enact another reality than the one that seems to rule the day.

When the voices of resignation say, "That's the way things are," the church mobilizes to respond, "They need not be."

When the voices of despair say, "I give up," the church responds, "Not today I don't."

When the voices of anger say, "Those sons of b!#%\$," the church responds, "are also children of God whom we pray for."

When the voices of hate say, "You don't belong here," the church, Christ-empowered and defiant, responds, "You are welcome here."

When the voices of greed say, "There's not enough, so fend for yourself," the church gathers for Gratitude Sunday five days after a polarizing election, to say, "Thank you, God, for your people and for the daily bread we share."

I am convinced that the most radical, constructive, peace-making thing we can do in light of our fractured society is to be the church, together, in this place and beyond, to be the church on behalf of the least and the lost, to be the church on behalf of Muslims, who are beloved of God, to be the church on behalf of Mexicans, who are our sisters and brothers, on behalf of women, who are the heart and soul of our families, our communities, and our nation.

I am convinced of this even though things are not going well, convinced of this even though I cannot see the way through, convinced of this even though the results of the election, and the potential consequences of it, are hard to stomach, convinced, in the words of Romans 8, "that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

These words are not a sentimental comfort; they are a summons to envision an alternative future which has been imagined, but not yet given.

To trust and enact that imagined future is the church's work, and, frankly, it is our work to do, regardless of who won last Tuesday.

Amen.