

23rd Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 11.13.22

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.¹⁸ But 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.²² 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.²³ They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord— and their descendants as well.²⁴ Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear.²⁵ 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,⁶ "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."⁷ They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?"⁸ 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."⁹ "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."¹⁰ Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom;¹¹ there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven."¹² "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."¹³ This will give you an opportunity to testify.¹⁴ So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance;¹⁵ for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.¹⁶ You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death.¹⁷ You will be hated by all because of my name.¹⁸ But not a hair of your head will perish.¹⁹ By your endurance you will gain your souls. (524)

We are nearing the end of the church year. One more Sunday to go after this. Then it's over.

And then we begin again. Another year—because we are not there yet.

Where, you wonder? The kingdom. The reign. We have not arrived to that perfection, that completion. Or it has not arrived here, the realm where no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress, where no more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days.

This is the eschaton—or a vision of it, an inkling of it. This is the end of all things, the being toward which all is headed, wolves and lambs feeding together, lions and oxen eating straw. No hurt. No destruction.

Imagine.

Impossible!

But imagine.

I'm back on my erg. With my erg partner, Anne, we're back on the machines that rowers count on to get them through winter. It's been four mornings that we've set ourselves down on those that are just quite simply work. They're called ergometers because they measure your work, which is what an ergometer is. Before Concept2 took the word to name its machine, an ergometer was just any apparatus for measuring energy or work.

It's just work.

It's just toil.

Back and forth on the rail. Hard work and going nowhere.

There are two kinds of crew coaches in the world. There are the kind that tell you, as a rower, as regards the practice ahead, what you're gonna do when you're gonna do it. You're on a need-to-know basis. And then there are the kind that tell you ahead of time what the whole practice will entail, what the goals of it are and such.

As a young rower, I worked with plenty of the former. You strap into a boat, you head out onto the water with seven other people similarly strapped in, and you anxiously await your orders.

And this could hurt: it could long or intense or in spite of a snow squall. Or it could be humiliating: you might be competing against the other rowers in your boat—seat-racing, see who's best.

Or it might not. Might just be a matter of steady state down and back, on a warm day, on smooth water, to feel for the run of the boat. Press: send. Press: send.

You never know. You're at the mercy of the coach, who'll tell you what you need to know when you need to know it and not before, at the mercy of someone who's not necessarily known for their mercy.

As a masters rower, with a lot more agency and discretion, I make sure to row with coaches who tell me the plan ahead of time, and this goes doubles for when I erg. I want to know. I want to know the plan, know it ahead of time—so I can agree to it or not, so I can know where to work and

where to be sure to rest. Because you can only work as hard as you also rest, and I can only work so hard before I need to know the goal, before I need to know the point, and what being finished with all the work will *look* like, will *feel* like.

What are we doing here, and why? What's the point?

Jesus is saying that there is work ahead for the disciples to do, the apostles to do. In the world, once he's gone—crucified, raised, ascended—there would be work for his followers to do. And it was going to be hard, sometimes. Sometimes very hard. “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.”

In other words, history will happen—in all the good and bad of it, in all the trials and triumphs of it.

He's in the Temple now, has been for a few days.

It hasn't been an easy time.

He's had arguments with priests, scribes, Sadducees. He's disrupted the buying and selling of animals for sacrifice—so-called cleansing the Temple, which upset the whole system of sacrifice, and called into question something that should be beyond question.

The way religion is practiced should be beyond question, right?

He's told parables whose obvious point was in criticism of the powerbrokers, sharp criticism.

And now he starts with this—the prediction that the Temple would fall. The Temple! This which was built never to fall. Having happened once, five hundred years back, to the warring power of the Babylonians, the original Temple arose again in this now 2nd Temple, built (again) as never to fall. Never to suffer such humiliation. Not again. Never to brought so low.

And, mind you, it wasn't just an architectural show of might, or even a cultural show of might. It was a sign of something essential. The presence of God on earth. The indwelling of the Lord.

The Temple, as I've told you before, and I'm sorry to repeat myself, was as the navel of the world. As it was imagined, as it was *conceived*, the cosmos is the whole body of God, and the world which we know is as *in utero*, and the Temple was the navel by which was connected the mother to the baby, the God of all things to this one creation being nurtured eventually to be labored forth.

This is why cathedrals have naves. The center of the cathedral, stretching from the main entrance to the chancel: the nave. The navel. The connection to the divine source.

The Temple was first at it. It made such nurturance possible.

And we know what happens when the navel comes loose, comes disconnected.

It's not good.

The Temple falling: how could Jesus speak of such a thing? And while standing in its courts? I mean, if the world were to come disconnected from its source...not good.

By the time of Luke's writing this, it had happened—which makes it so Jesus, remembered to have said this, seems all the more trustworthy, all the more true, for those earliest hearers of Luke's gospel narrative, and for us.

He was right! What he said would happen, *happened*. So maybe not just about this...?

I just finished reading Hannah Arendt's masterwork *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. It unfolds as an example of important historical narrative written by exactly the right person to give the story its full justice, exactly the right brilliant mind. So artfully told, the book served up moments where I, as a reader, was in awe. How does someone maintain such artful insightfulness for nearly five hundred pages of dense prose?

I read it slowly, over several weeks, until the last long chapter, which I realized I had to finish as quickly (if also carefully) as possible. (I didn't want to miss anything.) But it was just too sad. I couldn't handle spending much more time with it. Once you get through the horror—of the camps, of the gas chambers—you're left with the terror, the meaningless terror, and the isolated mass man who hardly even knows his own mind. So lonely. So many of them, so lonely.

There are several ingredients for totalitarian success. Antisemitism; racism; the state guaranteeing the rights of man and what happens to those rights when whole populations are deported, become stateless; a wholesale departure from the real-world applicability and effect of political ideology: these are all in the mix. And there's also this, which is both a precondition and an effect: the creation of mass man, the understanding and making of the human as a unit exemplifying and embodying the "law of nature" or the "law of history," and then the isolation of that mass man so there's no individuality, but there's also no community. There's just terror and isolation.

It's one of the tragedies of recent time that COVID isolated and terrorized in a similar, if far less extreme, way. And these conditions do seem to have resulted in a sizeable minority of our country's population, and perhaps even the world's population, to prefer a politics that is as disconnected from reality as anything in the Soviet or Nazi system. Please understand, I'm not implying that there's anything in our society today approaching the brutal decadence of the gulags

or the gas chambers, these which were inherent in those totalitarianisms. But the thorough acceptance that nothing we do in our politics has any grounding in, or responsibility to, reality is striking in its similarity.

Our politics, on the national level anyway, are almost entirely one of appearances, or aesthetics, and no one seems much to object to this.

For what it's worth, I'm convinced this is why abortion was so potent an "issue" at the polls, and not simply along party lines, and to the surprise of more than a few even serious political watchers. This: because it isn't an "issue." It's an utterly stubborn reality, especially for those who find themselves pregnant in troubling circumstances, which, though is hardly a majority, is something a majority of us can relate to in a terrifying way.

To have something growing in your body that you know will be the ruin of you: this is terrifying, which I say as someone who loved being pregnant and who loves being a mother. These things, pregnancy, motherhood, have been powerfully good in my life. But for those for whom they're not good, they're powerfully otherwise.

Abortion isn't an "issue," for being pregnant isn't an issue, but is a pressing, urgent, overpowering reality, so real that almost nothing else comes close, which makes it very hard to relate to if you're not someone who can get pregnant. And this makes it different from what we usually have to address in our national politics, which can therefore get away with being more abstract and notional, less responsive and responsible, less *embodied*.

It's a luxury, to be so unresponsive and irresponsible: a decadent luxury. But it's an expensive one, more expensive than we might have thought, as among its costs are an updated version of last century's isolated mass man. Ours, however, is now given over to the false connectivity of the internet.

It's been unnerving to see how many people seem to have lost their minds—a small minority, granted; but a noticeable one.

"Beware," Jesus said, during his own time of breakdown, "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." Do not follow them. "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified." Just persevere. Just believe in me, implying here what he said explicitly elsewhere. Believe in me and believe in the immediacy of one another. Stay together, stay in communion, and persevere.

I can't account for why those who seem to have lost their minds have. Why them and not others, I couldn't say. I can say, during the weird, worrisome, lonely time of COVID winter, I

clung to the story that holds us more than ever in my life. I moved through the liturgical year with a new quality of mindfulness, as if I believed this would be my salvation—and not in the pie-in-the-sky way but in a get-through-the-day way.

What's more, I think it did—save me. And I hope, as your pastor, it might likewise have done for you.

This morning Jesus tells us where we are, and where we will be for the time being. Wars and rumors of wars, natural disaster and human devastation. And this morning Isaiah tells us where we are going, what is the point. No more weeping or cries of distress. No more hurt. No destruction. Peace. Sustained and sustaining peace.

Imagine.

Impossible, I know. But just imagine. And then watch for it, and not only on the distant horizon as if from a watch-post. But also in your life, in your day, in *this* day. Watch for signs, inklings of the kindness, the care, the sustaining spirit of what Isaiah sketches out for us here. Watch for the arrival of salvation in time, what feels good, what feels true, what feels connected and human and manifest.

It is coming—and in our anticipation of it, our living into it, it has arrived.

Thanks be to God.