

MAKE IT NEW

ISAIAH 65: 17-25; LUKE 21: 5-19

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Thanksgiving comes this year at a precarious moment in world history. Perhaps you saw that picture on the front page of the *New York Times* Friday of a gunman walking slowly toward a pile of clothes in a marketplace in Karachi, Pakistan while dozens of onlookers were running backwards in all directions away from the perpetrator.

What looked at first like a tunic someone had dropped while fleeing turned out to be a young boy killed by the gunman, his small shoes just visible in the picture.

I don't know if it is my age or the epidemic unrest in our world or the inundation of such images in the news media over past decades but something inside me caved in when I saw that picture.

The scene in all truth could have been the East Side of Buffalo or the West Side for that matter or Jerusalem or Baghdad or London.

I hear more and more of my peers say they've stopped watching the evening news. That's remarkable for a generation who grew up on a daily regimen of Walter Cronkite. But you can understand their refusal.

Our world teeters between threats from climate change to rogue states to jittery economic fluctuations. And none of this is news. It is the very old story of human violence and greed rearing its head from time to time. The problem is the world is smaller and the stakes are bigger than ever before.

I borrowed the title of the sermon today from a 1934 famous essay by Ezra Pound who helped initiate a new direction in the arts by saying the job of the artist is to make a new beginning, a new discovery. But the impulse to 'make it new' is as old as the impulse to conquer and kill. Baptismal rituals were common among pre-Christian communities to wash and prepare the believer for reception and a fresh start into the faith community.

America was founded on the desire to start again with a clean slate. The old country—England—was corrupt. If you didn't have the right faith or proper last name your status in society was limited. Those who came to the new world gave their cities and regions names like: *New York*, *New Haven*, *New England*. As if to say 'watch us, Buckingham Palace, here's how it should be done.'

Immigrants streamed here from the four corners in successive centuries usually to escape the restrictions of tradition. The attraction to the U.S. was the new beginning, the opportunity to get it right, a second chance.

Somewhere in our history the impulse to make it new expanded from the spiritual and political foundation of society to include the things we buy and sell.

Longing for the new permeates our marketing strategies so that the "all new" laundry detergent or toothpaste promise far more happiness than they can ever deliver. How many times can you reinvent soap anyway?

So these stories from Isaiah and Luke today evoke not only hope but also perhaps a bit of skepticism.

I'd like to explore one of the themes of today's Scripture readings which is this: if we can understand and discern God's promise to make all things new amidst our culture's many claims to do the same, we will find hope and strength.

I say discern between God's and the culture's promise to make it new because the two are fundamentally different. The world's claims to make a better car or school or health care system while rooted in worldly power of better technology, faster computers, and closer market studies speak certainly to practical problems but often also carry the promise of satisfying our spiritual hunger for new life.

But changes we make to our world from sleeping pills to cell phones will be new only in this sense: they improve incrementally on what precedes them usually by making our lives more convenient and their relevance is soon outdated. So while we marvel at technological advances that reshape the world we know in our hearts incremental change and convenience do not satisfy our deepest spiritual yearnings.

I don't mean to make this complicated but doesn't God's promise to make all things new get tangled for believers in our society's mantra of onward and upward, and our culture's longing for perfection and affluence? The resurgent Gospel of wealth is an example.

The aspirations of each generation for a new day and new world at some point reveal their hollow side. You can see this in the American presidency which we invest with messianic expectations but ultimately reveals its clay feet.

Enter Isaiah and Luke. The world never has and the world never will satisfy our deepest spiritual hunger. But God's promise to do so can be trusted and embraced. For such a promise is based not on worldly wisdom or technology but on the power that made the universe.

And here let me explode a myth. When God created the heavens and the earth God did not get out of the business of creating. That's the old 'Watchmaker God.'

Rather, God continues to be at work in and through people and the circumstances of this life creating and making all things new. Indeed, the central promise of the Resurrection is a second chance, a new beginning.

In other words, death is not the end, only the God who made creation could defeat the darkness of death. My mistakes have consequences but in God's hands and with a contrite heart they become grist for new life.

Let me summarize today's stories. When Isaiah spoke to the exiles in Babylon telling them to return to Jerusalem and that God would rebuild the holy city some of those descendants of Jeremiah's generation decided to stay put.

They were wary of starting out, risking, giving up even life in exile which at least was familiar and predictable. So out of a combination of spiritual fatigue and fear they remained in Babylon where their grandparents were taken in exile.

Have you ever been there? Been to the point of giving up some dream for the sake of playing it safe and predictable? I've had a secret dream to be a really good dancer—to

be able to tango or twist the night away but my body never does what my mind envisions. So for fear of looking foolish I rarely dance unless it's a slow tune or the floor is jammed with people.

So while some of us can't criticize those who remained at their dinner tables in Babylon, we can be inspired by their family members and friends who did decide to get up and dance and went back to the holy city.

Yahweh, who brought the people to a land of milk and honey and then out of bondage in Egypt was a God to be trusted and followed even into the new dance of an uncertain future.

And if we think Isaiah's returning exiles had strength and fortitude consider the followers Jesus spoke to in today's story from Luke. Where Isaiah emphasizes God's new heaven and earth, Jesus emphasizes the turmoil of political chaos, military conquest and personal trial before God's new beginning would occur.

Jesus' message of the Apocalypse is not a message of the painless rapturing of God's faithful from earth to heaven at the end time. Rather, it is the revelation, which is what apocalypse means, that before the new comes, the old must die.

And in both Old and New Testaments today the message is clear: God's people are called to bear witness to God's future in present circumstances, precisely when the future cannot be seen and even when a new day seems most improbable.

Of all the challenges of the spiritual life perhaps this is the greatest: to let go of our faith in worldly power that leads to disappointment and grief and embrace the possibility and promise of God's new beginning.

The old has to end before the new can begin. The grandparents of Isaiah's community who distrusted God's leading and placed their faith in Egypt's military power were taken by Babylon's superior military into captivity. We talked about this last month.

In Jesus' time pretty much everything he predicted happened. Rome leveled the holy city. The center of Jewish life, the temple, was destroyed and the people were flung across the earth.

But the faith once centered in the temple was transformed into a faith spread over the globe. The Jews went from being a people of the temple to a people of the book. Wherever they lived they depended on God's word and God depended on them to radiate God's blessing to the community.

What this suggests is that God may be creating something new in and through us but such transformation doesn't usually come without some pain. For something to be born, something must die. For a door to open, one must close.

We don't usually like death and closed doors. We are, says Fred Buechner, 'artful dodgers', adept at avoiding pain so that our lives may sometimes feel like there is little that is really new about them.

But talk to any individual or family who has acknowledged some addiction or character flaw or embraced some heretofore covered up pain and had their life handed back to them and their zest for living can inspire even the most casual or regimented believer, flying below the radar, avoiding life.

I see this all the time. Some painful experience turns out to be a blessing. Someone is laid off or let go; a fiancée breaks his or her engagement; a family is transferred to another city. Such abrupt change is frightening and comes with despair.

Yet, invariably, when I talk to the individual or family some months later they make statements like “I love my new job,” or “Getting fired was the best thing that ever happened to me,” or “I’m so glad we didn’t make that life-long commitment when we weren’t ready.”

Such experiences come out of an approach to life that is far more profound than a positive attitude or mere optimism; rather they represent an openness to God’s presence with us even and especially when life is bleak and our circumstances harsh. God’s new beginning is neither incremental nor convenient. It is transformational. It redefines individuals and congregations because it shifts their expectations from the world as the source of their new life to God as the source of their new life.

Shortly we will elect new officers of this congregation. We are in the midst of a capital and annual stewardship campaign that have raised the bar for every member of this church.

What I hear today’s Scripture calling us to do on this eve of our annual thanksgiving for God’s abundance in our lives is to leave the land of timid expectations and enter the land of holy promise.

In a world where children are gunned down in the public square isn’t it time to let go and invest our lives, our energy and our money in God’s new beginning and learn to dance. Amen.