

New Heavens and New Earth

As we enter these last weeks of the long Pentecost season, you may have noticed that the readings are focusing on the end times. It makes sense that the end of a lectionary year should bring to mind the end of the world, as difficult as that topic may be. The beginning of Advent will continue that theme as it looks toward the second coming of Christ before zeroing in on his first coming on Christmas Day.

The passage I just read from Luke is pretty typical of what we hear at this time of year. It's a threatening picture with its wars and insurrections, earthquakes, famines, and plagues. Every generation thinks they hear echoes of their own time. But Luke isn't interested in predicting when the end will come, any more than Jesus himself was. Luke is focused on faithfulness and endurance. Don't be led astray, he says. Don't despair when you see all that is happening. Not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.

Luke's injunction to beware that one is not led astray is particularly powerful to me at the end of yet another divisive election cycle. I tend to shy away from politics in the pulpit because I know that our political divisions do not stop at the church door. The recent election results will have delighted some people and horrified others. Luke tells us that we always need to be wary of those who say "I am he!" Nevertheless, I think we can all agree that there isn't a lot to make one optimistic about where the world is going.

Perhaps that's why I like today's passage from Isaiah so much better than Luke. It is so full of light and hope. Much of the book of Isaiah is about suffering and destruction. Today's verses appear near the end and are remarkable for their spirit of promise. That's especially true when you consider that they were likely written after the exile in Babylon. The people would have been demoralized, despairing, wondering if God was really with them. To them the prophet gives this remarkable vision of a new heavens and a new earth. If that vision sounds familiar, it's because it reappears near the end of the Revelation to John, shortly before the very end of the Bible itself.

God is speaking here, and the tense is most striking. God is *about to create*. In other words, the new creation is imminent. There will be new heavens (note the plural) and a new earth. Jerusalem will be created as a joy and its people as a delight. What a message of hope! There shall be no weeping and no cry of distress. As a botanist my favorite part is that the days of the people shall be like the days of a tree. I think of those days as being long and serene, basking in the sun.

What Isaiah describes fits people who have lived in exile. He says that they will build and plant on their own land and eat what they have grown. There are also echoes of a new Eden. The wolf and lamb will feed together and the lion will eat straw like an ox. Carnivores will become vegetarian. Only the serpent is left out of the blessing.

Isaiah's prophecy is so full of hope. So why do we feel like we're living the life that Luke describes, where everything seems to be going downhill? What Luke wrote was likely the lived

experience of the early Christians, who suffered persecution as Christians still do in some parts of the world.

Hearing both readings on the same day brings out the paradox of the Christian life, with its sense of already and not yet. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God has already come and death has been vanquished. But not yet do we see that kingdom manifested in its fullness on earth. Not yet do we experience the end of death and live the resurrected life. St. Paul had it right when he wrote that all creation waits with eager longing, groaning in labor pains, for our final redemption. It just can't come soon enough.

In the meantime, we have glimpses of what is promised by Isaiah. We see it in the beauty of creation, in relationships forged with family and friends, and in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. That's what it's really all about, isn't it? Faithfulness. Endurance. Doing the work God has given us to do. And doing it all because God once came to dwell among us, and because God will return to make all things right. Thanks be to God for the gift of Jesus Christ, and thanks be to God for all of you.