

**“With Bible and Newspaper in Hand”**  
**Isaiah 65:17–25, 2 Thessalonians 3:6–13, Luke 21:5–19**  
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Theologian Karl Barth once said that we should hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, read both, and then allow scripture to inform our approach to issues in the world around us and life in general. We might need to expand our sources of information about the world to more than the newspaper, but the claim remains compelling. It is a faithful way to approach life, and the good news for us is that we read a lot of Bible every week in this service alone.

In many Baptist churches, very little scripture is read while a great deal is said about it. The emphasis is more on what the preacher says about the Bible than what the Bible says. It seems ironic for people of the book! The challenge for those of us who use the lectionary is not reading too little scripture, but how to make sense of texts, often lengthy, that sometimes seem — and occasionally are — completely unrelated.

This may appear to be the case today. We have an idyllic vision from Isaiah, practical instructions about work in 2 Thessalonians, and an apocalyptic prediction from Jesus in Luke. Our heads may be swimming as we try to make sense of any of these readings, much less how they might be related, while we sit here reflecting on the election, a war in Ukraine, a divided nation, the wonder of Toy Joy, the meaning of Veteran’s Day, and what we are going to do for lunch.

On a day like this, the normal preacher move is to use one text and ignore the others. Whether anything that is said addresses pressing life issues depends on the preacher and the congregation. Many pastors and churches have a tacit agreement never to talk about anything that matters in fear of disagreement, but that means you can’t talk about the color of paint, much less the vital issues that keep people up at night, and that has never been this church’s posture. So, I plan to address the things we are thinking about right now, in light of all three texts. They may not be connected, but each of them has something to say that is helpful.

In his second letter to the Thessalonians, the Apostle Paul urges his readers not to be weary in doing what is right. Our text says a good bit more about the value of a work ethic, but these words can be easily misunderstood. Paul is not framing public policy here. He is talking about life in the church. Shared life is more pleasant when everyone is pulling his/her weight within the church and the community.

In the church alone, some become weary because they are doing too much while others are not doing enough. An incomparable ministry like Toy Joy requires hundreds of volunteers, but it also depends on key leaders like Sabrina Tyndall and Carol Blanchard and others, who work around the year to make this happen. And as is often the case, these same key leaders end up carrying the weight of other ministries, like the Clothing Ministry. If we all do our share, we won't wear out a small group of devoted people, and we will benefit from our investment.

But Paul concludes this section with a broader statement, saying — do not be weary in doing what is right. The assumption is that we might become weary at times. This is such a time for many of us. We are weary with the pandemic, all the adjustments and limitations still. We are weary with hybrid forms of everything, including church, doing double work without anything coming off our plate. We are weary with the divisions of our nation, and talking about the divisions. We are weary with the meanness and hatred that seems to permeate everything. We are weary with church processes that are necessary and helpful, but seem to go on much longer than necessary.

We are weary with being weary, so much so that we are tempted to quit trying. Nothing is going to change anyway. No matter how hard we work to build interfaith relationships, another Kanye will pop up and spread anti-Semitism. No matter how faithfully we work for peace, another megalomaniac like Putin will rise to power and rain down terror on innocents. No matter how diligently we seek to promote truth and understanding among people with different views and perspectives, the purveyors of lies and disinformation will use every means possible to build walls of ignorance. We feel like the wolves in a cartoon looking up at a full moon, saying, “Do you think we are making a difference?” “Why bother?” we wonder at times, we are howling at the moon.

But Paul says — do not be weary in doing what is right. We should keep doing what we believe God calls us to do — when we feel like it and when we do not, when we seem to be making a difference and when we do not — because no one knows what will happen in God’s grace over time, and because God doesn’t hold us responsible for results.

Mother Teresa was asked how she kept investing her life in caring for the poor when there always seem to be more poor people anyway. What difference was she making? Well, a big difference for those she helped, but she replied, “God did not call me to be successful, only to be faithful.” Such is our calling in a time of many needs. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said that the time is always right to do what is right. “Do not give in to fatigue.” Paul says, “Keep at it.”

The reading from Isaiah provides further help for us. It is a vision of hope after a time of despair, God’s vision of the ideal community. Someone has said that it looks like an urban design plan — homes, food, jobs, fair labor, no infant mortality, and a generous life expectancy for all! It almost seems too good to be true, and it is, in part, aspirational, but it is God’s goal to be lived toward, very much like the image of the beloved community that grows out of the teachings of Jesus.

It’s important to have a sense of the context for these words. They are not written by the same prophet who is called in the year Uzziah died. These words are dated to the time when the exile has ended and people have begun returning to the land. So, we are talking about a hopeful time after decades of desolation.

But there are also new challenges in this time. As the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, we can never step in the same river twice because the river is not the same nor are we. Or as North Carolina novelist Thomas Wolfe put it, you can’t go home again.

And it’s not just that the exiles who have survived and their descendants are returning to land that is familiar yet also different. Some of the people never left. Sorting out how these two groups of one nation-family with such different life experiences will live, govern, worship, and work together is no small matter. There may even be disputes over who owns what land. There is to this day in Palestine!

But according to Isaiah, God is about to create new heavens and a new earth — “create,” *bara*, the same Hebrew word used in Genesis. And in this new order, there will be no weeping, only joy. People will build homes and live in them, plant vineyards and eat their fruit. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; serpents — that is, deceivers — will have no place. God will hear the people’s prayers before they voice them.

It sounds like a utopian existence, something otherworldly; even the animals dwell together in peace! But this is God’s intent for this world, first for ancient Jewish people who will inhabit again land that is holy for them. There will be great challenges, but it will be possible for them to know joy in community, even with all their differences.

We live in a different time with different challenges, and it may seem that we have less in common and more to tear us apart. But God’s vision of community has not changed, and it is obtainable, in God’s grace and with our commitment. So, the calling of holy scripture in times like this is not simply a sacred version of Nike’s “Just do it!” Don’t be weary! Keep at it! The calling is to pursue a goal that God has said is possible, that God has, in fact, already made a reality, we just have yet to experience it. It is possible for everyone to have enough to eat. It is possible for truth to win out over lies. It is possible for people who act like predators and prey to live together in peace. It is possible.

But there is one other insight in today’s readings we need to keep in mind. In the reading from Luke, Jesus notices that some people are admiring the magnificence of the temple, and says, “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.” He goes on to talk about catastrophic events that will not be signs of the end and how the faithful ought to respond. He is talking about the dawn of a new age that will emerge with his death and resurrection, and it will ultimately be a good thing, a wondrous thing, but it will be you-know-what getting there, and that glorious future will require setting aside many things dear to the people.

To be more specific, the temple has just been refurbished. The project has taken eighty years. No expense has been spared. The

building contains pieces of white marble sixty-seven feet long, twelve feet high, and twelve feet wide. Blue, scarlet, and purple Babylonian tapestries form a veil at the entrance. The gates are silver-plated, the doors are gold-plated. Imagine that we have spent eight decades redoing this sanctuary on a scale never imagined, the pride we feel, the gratitude for sacred memories. Jesus says, "It's all coming down in the new age." Imagine how we respond. Jesus is in trouble at the next church conference!"

The disciples don't even engage the obvious question, they trust that Jesus has come from God, and so, they want to know when this will happen and what they should do. It is a good response, but surely others in the temple get stuck on the very idea of all that is sacred to them being torn down. It will happen, only the Western Wall remains from the Roman War, but for the new to come, the old must pass away.

I am not predicting the ruin of this sacred space... but the enduring truth here is that the new thing God is doing does not always match our past experience. That is, there is hope for the church, our nation, and the world, hope we should work toward tirelessly, but God's new thing may be quite different than we anticipate.

I think it was Victor Hugo who said that religions come and go, but God remains. All traditions come and go, but God remains. The fact that we may lose some things we think are sacred does not mean all is lost. Many things have changed over the course of the past 2,000 years. Many times, like when science proved that the earth is not the flat center of the universe, people thought all was lost, the church was dying; it was not. Sometimes change is required for the future hope God envisions.

The world around us is changing. The church will have to change to have a continuing witness. Buildings may not be as important or used in the same ways. Things like ownership and control, always illusions, may need to be rethought. We may need to set aside some personal preferences in order to build bridges with people who are different. We may have to go into the world more, as Jesus calls us to go, but change is possible. We need to keep working toward it, and all the while realize it is God's change, not ours. Understanding this, with Bible and the newspaper in hand, forth we go!