

“Something More than Sad Songs”

Isaiah 65:17–25

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Preaching from the lectionary this year with an awareness of the challenges of these times, I have felt a bit like Harry Chapin must have felt when he wrote the song “Stop Singing These Sad Songs.” He had written so many songs portraying unrequited love like “A Better Place to Be,” people with deep-seated problems like “Sniper,” and general discontent like “Anyone Old Kind of Day” that he must have heard from many people asking for something more hopeful. So, he wrote:

Ah, stop singing these sad songs
Just tell me 'bout the good times
I have heard that cold hard truth
So many times before
Stop singing these sad songs
Just tell me 'bout the good times, baby
'Cause I don't wanna hear
Them old heartbreaking sad songs anymore

Well, so it has gone with the prophets this fall. There have been a lot of sad songs about suffering and injustice, such that at least some of you would probably like the sadness to stop so that we can experience a little joy. If only it were so in the world around us... But the good news is the prophet Isaiah gives us a little taste of joy in our reading today.

It comes near the end of the book, in the next to last chapter, which is part of what many scholars call Third Isaiah, a third collection of writings attached to the same name. This collection is connected to the period when the Israelites have returned from exile in Babylon. They have looked forward to resettling in their land, and they are glad to be there, delighted not to be captives anymore, but things are not going as they imagined, perhaps unreasonably.

What comes after great transformational events, even long-hoped-for ones, is often not as straightforward as naively imagined. Think of post-communist Russia, post-Saddam Iraq, or what has happened in the Middle East and North Africa after the Arab Spring fifteen years ago. It has been tough going. As the Israelites wandering in the wilderness after the Exodus from Egypt often pined for the good old days of indentured service, some of these folks have wondered if they are better off now.

We don't know that the Israelites want to go back to Babylon, but in our reading, we can see that not all is well in Zion. Isaiah envisions a better day when certain bad things are no longer experienced, and the clear implication is that they are being experienced now — premature death, economic exploitation, food insecurity. Apparently, people build houses that others end up living in, plow fields that others end up harvesting, just generally experience injustice daily, like they did in exile, and before that, in bondage in Egypt.

But Isaiah does not dwell on these things here. They form the background for why he must present a new image of a better life that God will bring into being where Jerusalem is full of joy, God takes delight in the people, and the people live long lives, live in their own homes, harvest their own fields. Even the animals will be transformed as the wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox... we will get to that.

Unlike the new heaven and earth envisioned in Revelation 21, where the old earth has passed away and the sea is no more, in this vision the new creation takes place amidst the old. God's capacity for recreation is unlimited. This is a massive transformation, makeover, or do over. God will be at work, Isaiah says, to usher in a new day of hope and joy where justice and peace reign throughout the land. He doesn't say when it will happen or exactly how, only that it will.

It begins with the capacity to forget the more difficult times. "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;" God says in the text, "the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind." In some ways, this may seem counterintuitive. We often say that we need to remember the past so that we don't repeat it. But the truth is we often do

anyway. It is possible to learn from history – personal or national – but often we neither know our history nor learn from it when we do. Yet the prophetic vision suggests there is a time when we should forget the past.

Episcopal rector Martha Sterne tells a story about a newly ordained person who was troubled by her occasional forgetfulness about issues that parishioners brought to her (*Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 4, p. 293). She couldn't remember congregational quarrels and gossip people shared with her, nor did she remember specific content from some heartrending pastoral conversations and confessions. A more experienced pastor suggested that perhaps her forgetfulness was a gift from God, saying there may be such a thing as “holy amnesia.”

Some pre-op meds used before major procedures, like heart bypass surgery, function this way. They not only calm us before the procedure; they erase the memories of the most difficult period right after surgery. We may talk to a loved one in recovery, and they may seem lucid but also say some strange things, and later they don't remember the conversation at all. That can be a good thing.

Real memory loss is no laughing matter, but there are things we are better off not remembering, memories from which there is nothing to learn and nothing to gain. I asked the father of a church member in another setting who was a retired minister how he managed the decades of baggage we inevitably carry, difficult memories of personal struggles we are privy to and church tensions of various intensities. He said when he retired and moved to a different city, he left the residue of all the memories and emotions he had carried in a certain river he crossed on the way and never looked back.

That is a gift if you can pull it off. For most of us, it's not as easy as flipping a switch. But Isaiah says that in God's new creation we will be able to let go of memories we want to let go of – times of personal struggle, times of national chaos and international fear and hostility, times of grief and brokenness, suffering and pain. The former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.

Perhaps a part of how such “holy amnesia” is possible is that in God's new creation our struggles are transformed into experiences of a

kind of joy that overwrites the struggles completely. In this new time God envisions, there is no premature death, economic exploitation, or food insecurity. One who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth — we have a couple of those people right now — people will build houses and live in them, plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No more shall the sound of weeping be heard, it will be a time of rejoicing!

In the text, all of this seems to happen as a gift from God, a new creative act that transcends all struggle. The struggle has come as a result of human failing, first the failing that led to the nation being taken into exile, and then the failing at trying to shape a new life in their homeland once they returned. One might think God would run out of patience at some point. We might if these were our children. How can God bail them out again and again? There seems to be no limit to God's grace, no limit to God's creative capacity. As Martha Sterne puts it, human sin is no match for God's joy. God will simply not give up, no matter how many times the people fail to get it!

This is good news for us because we fall short as many times as they do. In our personal lives, we act in selfish ways, seek vengeance instead of healing, withhold compassion. In our land, many experience premature death, economic exploitation, and food insecurity. This is not God's intent for us, this is not what we are called to do with our privilege and freedom, but it is what many experience. Yet the text assures us that God envisions and will make possible a new reality where all injustice and hostility is wiped away, and even the wolf and the lamb, the lion and the ox will dwell together in peace.

The latter part of this may seem impossible, laughably so. There was an old "Far Side" cartoon in which various animals, lions and deer included, are all together reading books on predator-prey relationships. Predator and prey animals don't read books about or work on their relationships. A colleague once asked during a children's time what the kids thought about the lion eating straw like the ox, to which one of the children replied, "In the real world, the lion would eat the ox."

This just seems unrealistic, impossible, pure fantasy, but perhaps no more so than the vision of people living together in peace, given our belief in a survival-of-the-fittest world. But the message of the prophet

is that this is the world that God not only intends but makes possible as well. As a result, we are called to live toward this vision. We alone cannot realize it, but if we believe in it, if we trust that God will do as God promises, we can live toward it, and perhaps doing so, along with other believers around the world, is how God will make it happen.

The real-world miracle of Toy Joy which took place yesterday is one way we do that. It is a magnificent ministry of hundreds of people enabling one thousand children and their families experience the authentic joy of Christmas — not just toys, books, and food but people choosing the way of service and offering kindness to others, enabling them to know in abundance sacred and ordinary things, which are often one and the same. Toy Joy is one way among many in which we in this church live toward God’s vision of a new heaven and a new earth.

The Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel, with whom we worked a decade ago with members of Tempel Beth Or, also does this. It is an organization of Jews, Christians, and Muslims who take Israeli and Palestinian children and youth on retreats to build relationships across all differences. Their focus is not on a political solution, though they pray for one, but even when it comes, people will have to get along with each other. They are working to make that possible, living toward God’s vision of a new heaven and earth with justice and peace for all.

It may seem like that is a lost cause now, after all that has happened the last two years. We might as well put the wolf and the lamb together along with the lion and the ox. It’s not going to happen! Well, not without God... but that’s the point, we are not without God. The question is – are we with God? Do we have enough faith to trust in this future, enough faith to live toward it?

Near the end of our reading, the prophet says the serpent will eat dust. “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox, but the serpent — its food shall be dust!” Poor serpent, no hope for him... but the serpent is a symbol of bad choices, evil, deceit; and dust is a symbol of death. All that is evil is put to death, the text says, it has no hope of winning in the end against the forces of good. Perhaps this can help us, in God’s grace, to find the faith we need.