

Visions of a New Earth - a sermon by Lori Unger

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Isaiah 65:17-25

Have you ever walked on Holy ground? I've never been to the Grand Canyon, but by all accounts it is a powerful and inspiring landscape, as close as it comes to sacred space. I mean that place where heaven and earth come together and one seems to be in the presence of God.

The Hopi Indians and their ancestors are Native Americans who have lived in on the surrounding steppes in Northwestern Arizona for thousands of years. These Southwest American Indians inhabited an area called the Black Mesa, a plateau which rises 1,000 feet above the surrounding grasslands, and refer to this place as the center of the universe. The Hopi were a thriving and sophisticated people. Farming and agriculture was the cornerstone of traditional Hopi life. They grew corn - over twenty different varieties of corn, including yellow and blue. They also grew squash, not only for eating, but for making instruments and utensils. Pumpkins and beans were grown for food and they cultivated sunflower so they could make dyes and oils. They also grew cotton and tobacco.

A story is told and remembered among the Hopi Indians who have lived since memory began in this holy space, the story of the end of days. Though their people had cultivated and tended that land for thousands of years, they were suddenly and summarily relocated as though their presence there was a presumption. The story goes that the settlers were delighted upon their arrival to find gardens – planted and tended – ripe for the harvest. Just waiting for them! Imagine that.

“They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. 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.

“For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;

New heavens and a new earth...a beautiful vision of prosperity and new life, of enough. But reading between the lines, these poignant verses speak volumes about what life has been for those who received this poem, about the griefs, the pains, the dashed hopes of the Jews in that time, not unlike the experiences of the Hopi. Judah had fallen to Babylon, and Jerusalem had been destroyed, its temple smashed and its people dispersed or killed. Many had been taken to Babylon – whole communities relocated and then oppressed. Now the Jews have been allowed to return to their homeland, the long-awaited moment. This poem comes from that Jerusalem, from the perspective of one who lived among the returnees, those who had expected a glorious restoration and found themselves frustrated by innumerable hardships, in particular famine and a resulting poverty. Their misery is etched into these verses, even as the poem calls forth a brighter future.

It strikes me that this utopian vision, this Brave New World, is profoundly modest in its proposals. This isn't a picture of excess or even abundance. It's simply a world in which things are put to right. Where babies don't die in infancy because of malnutrition or disease, where a person can expect to live a full life. That you get to live in the house you build, and eat from your own garden. Where children aren't born into a war zone, where you pray and God answers. Is it really too much to ask? It's not too much to ask. But neither has it been a reality for these folks. What should be a given seems a luxury beyond imagining; what should be just the way life is has been an impossible dream. Such basic aspects of life, set alongside the horror of war and deprivation and hunger and death are like a tall glass of water to a parched throat. Imagine simply giving birth to

a baby who lives. To glean the fruits of your own labour. To live to a ripe old age. Paradise.

How can it be? When all has been lost and nothing is right, how can we possibly hope for wholeness and life? It's about the holy mountain – there it is in the last line. The mountain is a metaphor for God's presence – a presence that makes all things well.

The Hebrew Bible is full of references to the mountain of the Lord. At one time, the "Mountain" was actually a "mountain" – you'll remember that God dwelt on Mount Sinai as the Israelites escaped from Egypt – the mountain was the place of God's presence among them.

In this text the "mountain" takes on a very tangible form. The temple, which had been destroyed with the sacking of Jerusalem, was going to be rebuilt. Where God had been far away, God would again take up residence among the people, and a new world would begin. Human efforts would come to fruition, crops would be bountiful, even the animals would live peaceably among the people and the world would be returned to the way things should be.

So there is. There is the hope. God has taken up residence in the city and the world will be renewed, not just once but in an ongoing way. The new heaven and the new earth is God's on-going activity and is being created "new" every day. God's creative work turns the regular mundane world of the city into holy space, God's territory. God's blessings radiate out into the steppe and the wilderness, the abode of wild animals and dangerous creatures, to the earth and all of its inhabitants. Every day, God recreates this cosmos: a world of harmony, prosperity and joy.

In today's world, this vision is sometimes replaced by the "prosperity gospel," the notion that if we praise God and do the right things, God will reward us individually with prosperity. Too often, though, we think "prosperity" means money and, personal wealth for us as individuals.

The picture of prosperity in Isaiah is not one of personal wealth, however. It is a picture of communal harmony. And that community is defined in the broadest of terms: though it begins at the temple, it extends beyond the walls of any particular place and spills onto the sidewalks, through the highways and byways. It includes even the things that can harm us. God's blessings are seen when the poorest and most at risk among us live to a ripe old age. It is a picture of wholeness, fullness, health, nonbrokenness.

We Mennonites haven't traditionally put much stock in buildings – we know that God doesn't reside within four walls; we don't need a Temple to be assured of God's presence. In fact, we have claimed with Matthew 18 that where two or three gather in God's name, God is there with them. God is here because we are here – God's presence is among us. In a sense God is a verb – God is what we *do*, God is who we *are*. And I see evidence of that God-ness every time I gather together with you. I see people caring for each other, supporting each other, carrying each other's burdens in meaningful and tangible ways. Because God is among us, we are never alone, we have enough.

And yet this text urges us to see the effects of the God-ness among us in even greater terms. Isaiah 65:17-25 invites people today to consider how our experience of God's holiness changes the whole world – not just this gathered community. God among us cannot be contained in four walls, and the God-effect cannot be confined to our interactions with each other. God among us spills over our edges, the way water, poured into a cup too small, runs joyfully into every nook and crevice. Who are we to contain it? Who are we to keep it to ourselves? Our God is creating new heavens and a new earth – who are we to stand in its way?

Our series this fall reminds us to seek the welfare of our city. And this week, given recent municipal events, we didn't need to look far to find brokenness and despair. But what has any of this to do with us? Well, our bodies are also temples, aren't they? God dwells in us. What would it look like if we allowed God to spill out from us, in every interaction? I have a feeling it would look a lot like the Fruits of the Spirit, where our

chosen posture toward others is generosity, where love becomes more than something we feel, but something we do. In Marilyn's words, what would happen if we allowed ourselves to develop a full-blown case of Jesus? I have a feeling the world would change – and ourselves first of all.

All of these things I have been talking about are nice to imagine. But nothing about it is merely theoretical. Allowing God's presence to spill over in us is profoundly practical – it finds traction in real time. If our bodies are a temple – if God is present there – then God is also in our families, our schools, our places of work, our church, our city, our country, our world. Finding God's presence in the world is like looking into two mirrors facing each other, the image multiplying into infinity. Looking into those mirrors can be terrifying even as it is exhilarating. It pulls us into the vortex of God's purposes and we may find ourselves completely outside our comfort zone. That's when we allow God within us to carry us away – even into the unknown. And as our text reminds us, we will begin to see God's blessings when the poorest and most at risk among us flourish and live to a ripe old age. This is our task. This is our challenge. This is our vision. Amen.

And for those whose world has been shaken, who have sown their seed and laboured with their hands, only to see it all swept away..... rest assured. God is in this place, and is doing a new thing.

