

New Heavens and a New Earth

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Isaiah 65:17-19 & 23-25 — For I am creating new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am creating Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. ... They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD, and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat grass like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.

A lot has happened since last Sunday, friends. Or rather, one *really* big thing has happened. Some people are disappointed, and some people are pleased. Some people are newly energized, either with anger or with hope. But most of us, I imagine, are more exhausted than energized. This election season was unprecedented in many ways, a perfect storm, and many of us threw ourselves into the hurricane — or at least we felt like we were thrown into it. Now it's over. Some of us are enjoying the calm after the storm, while some of us feel like we are still spinning.

I chose this morning's text and wrote much of this sermon before the election results were released, and that was intentional on my part. Because the message that I want to speak today, the good news that I want to share, doesn't depend on what happened this past Tuesday — or even on what happens over the course of the next four years. I believe that the ideas and images of Isaiah 65 are rich in truth for us today, and that truth isn't diminished one bit by anyone sitting in the Oval Office.

Now, don't get me wrong: this election mattered to me. Like you, I have been intellectually and emotionally invested in the political process over the past year, and I have very strong opinions about much of what has transpired. So strong are my opinions, in fact, that there were times when certain relationships in my life became strained. I assume that I'm not alone in this. And of course, our opinions are strong for a reason: this country, our country, will change because of this election, and whatever those changes turn out to be, they matter.

This morning, though, I'd like us to reflect on what is *not* changed by this election — both things in the present, which we can readily see aren't changed, and things in the future, which we have faith aren't changed. With regards to the present, those of us who have jobs, for example, still have the same jobs, those of us who are retired are still retired, and those of us who are in school are still in school; we have the same spouse or partner, the same family, the same friends — even if tensions are lingering; you are more or less the same person that you were before. You might have some new emotions, new fears or hopes, but you are the same gifted, flawed, beautiful

person that you were before, and you are still on the same journey — even if the road has taken a sudden turn. Lastly, you are a part of the same community of faith. We are still here, friends, and regardless of who this country's president is, we as a church are committed to the same principles: proclaiming God's love for all people and all creation; putting that love into practice in our own lives; offering hospitality and an extravagant welcome to all; and caring especially for those who are vulnerable, those who are enduring injustice. There will be lots of twists and turns on this church's road, friends. But through them all, we will keep walking in the same direction. Through it all, we will keep walking together.

And where are we walking to? What future do we work towards and have faith in? That's what Isaiah 65 is all about: imagining where God is taking us, imagining what the end of the road looks like. As we talked about last week, the road that we as God's people are on leads to *shalom*, to the perfect flourishing and harmony of all God's creation. Here in Isaiah 65, it's called "new heavens and a new earth."

This morning, I want to focus on just one part of this passage: the imagery of wolves and lambs feeding together, of lions and oxen eating grass together. It's a pretty fantastical image, right? Predator and prey frolicking in the forest. Many people will dismiss this language as fantasy, and understandably so, but before we do that, let's think about the underlying message here. We know that it is the very nature of predator and prey to be at odds with one another. They are *naturally* in conflict. We think of the relation between predators and prey as a natural violence, a normal and inevitable violence. At some point in the past, you've probably heard someone say that it's a dog-eat-dog world out there. Certainly, it's a wolf-eat-lamb world, a predator-eat-prey world. Some things, we assume, are just designed to be in conflict. Some things, we assume, are forever destined to be at odds — some things, some ideas, some groups, some people — we assume. But is that the case in the new heavens and new earth? Is God creating and calling us into a dog-eat-dog world?

Here's what I think Isaiah 65 is saying to us with these images of wolves and lambs, lions and oxen: even the conflict and violence that you all think of as *natural*, that you all think of as normal and inevitable in this world; even the things and the people that seem destined to be at each other's throats; even this conflict, this violence, is unnatural under God's perfect reign. Friends, in the future *shalom* to which we are headed, all pain and strife are unknown and unknowable. Regardless of who this country's president is, we have faith in this future, in God's future, and we work towards this future *now*. The final words in our passage are "They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD." It's both a proclamation about the future and an exhortation for our present. Because hurt and destruction are not a part of the *shalom* that awaits us, we might as well stop hurting and stop destroying now.

That said, our God is a God who not only builds up, but who also tears down. God calls us to fight against certain things, and there is still a place for prophetic rage in this world — when vulnerable people are mocked or abused; when help for those most in need is callously denied; when fear of the stranger drives out empathy for them; when men speak and act as if a woman

can be touched however and whenever a man pleases; when dominance over individuals or over nations is treated as a moral good; when creation is regarded as our possession, rather than as God's treasure; when unnecessary divisions and animosities are willfully sown; and when we refuse to see our own complicity in these evils; when our prophetic rage is untouched by humility and confession; when we point the finger at our neighbor instead of reaching out our hand. Friends, whoever this country's president is, our community of faith will keep working towards the *shalom* to which we are called. In this time of celebration for some and horror for others, let's reach out our hands to each other, to our country, and to our world. Amen.