

“From Pain to Hope”
Sermon delivered 11-14-10
Immanuel Lutheran Church
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Isaiah 65:17–25

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. ¹⁸But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. ¹⁹I 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. ²⁰No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. ²¹They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. ²²They 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. ²³They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD—and their descendants as well. ²⁴Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. ²⁵The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw 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.

Holy Pains

Reading and hearing the first lesson sounds like pie in the sky theology and thinking. “I am about to create a new heaven and new earth... be glad and rejoice...” This is the conclusion that comes at the end of the book of the prophet Isaiah. This is like unemployed person declaring he or she got the job, but what you don’t know is the months they searched and struggled after the benefits came to an end. This is like a new mother announcing she is going to have a baby, but you not being aware she has been trying for years. Unless one understands the old, the new makes no sense.

The old involved a people who forgot they were created and chosen by God with a mission to be “light to the nations of the world”. They wanted to be like other nations with power, control, and recognition. They forgot who they were, their mission and purpose as God’s chosen people. The prophets sent by God to remind them were laughed at, persecuted, and ignored. The day came when the Babylonians captured Jerusalem and took the inhabitants into Babylon. They remained there for 70 years.

This is a painful story. This story is about sacred wounding and holy pains, a story appropriate for our times and our world if you listen and read the news. How do you make sense out of it for your own life? Nobody wants to talk about the pain. I needed this last week to process the death of my father. I don’t know yet how to respond to the question, “How are you?” except perhaps learning it is a difficult question. Now for the first time in my ministry, I can move from saying, “I can only imagine what this is like” to, “I understand what this is like.”

Israel was in pain for 70 years in Babylon, the pain of losing their Temple, their Holy Ground, all that they had known, being uprooted and planted in a strange land. The pain of losing all they knew and loved. You know someone experiencing this pain today on the edge of losing a home, a job, a relationship. The struggle of our economy and economic uncertainties about tomorrow affect us all. We know we are in trouble but we don't want any of our sacred cows to be slaughtered. We want to make sure they keep the mortgage exemption, social security, and host of other benefits. There are riots on the streets of France and England, even with just small changes.

Bad News

Jesus quoted the Book of the Prophet Isaiah more than any other book, stories about pain and redemption like Job, Jonah, and Jeremiah. Wait, stop! Why write and talk about it? I didn't come here this morning to hear bad news. I came to hear and read good news. Before you can hear about a "new heaven and a new earth" you must understand the pain, and the importance of understanding pain. Pain and suffering are defined as "not being in charge of or having control over your life." It is painful when one becomes immobilized, stuck, trapped as a result of a physical, political, or emotional situation.

As the Body of Christ, we look for understanding in our suffering, when we are not in control of our lives. What do we do and how do we make sense of the tragic and the painful? If we do not make sense of our pain, understand our suffering, we will transmit it to others. We see this when a child who is abused becomes an abuser. We need to ask the question of God's presence in the midst of suffering, chaos, and confusion.

The Bible is a story of God walking into the middle of dramas of pain and suffering. From Cain and Abel, Joseph being thrown into the pit by his brothers, David the liars, cheating, adultery, and murder, God gets right down in the thick of it all and does a new thing. God uses the lives of ordinary wounded people like you and me to do a new thing, creating a new heaven a new earth. It is through the pain we are transformed. This is more than just sitting in the corner and singing "Amazing Grace". Deliverance from captivity is a new creation. Getting control of your life and giving others control and respect over their lives is the way out of pain. Some of us may just resign ourselves to the pain because it has become familiar. This is not the will of God for you, to be in pain, because it only results in bringing pain to others.

Transformation

Moving from pain to health is a story of transformation, new life, new creation, and a new way of doing your life. One of the most powerful stories of transformation outside of the Bible, for me, comes from Shakespeare. My favorite is King Lear. King Lear, if you are familiar with the story, had three daughters. He is ready to divide up his kingdom proportionally among them based on how they could flatter him with love. The oldest said, "I love you more than...." the second gave a sentimental speech, and the third, Cordelia, is silent until pressed by the King. Then Cordelia says, "I love you according to my bond", meaning her obligation.

She got cut out of the will. The kingdom gets divided between the other two sisters. When they got control they stripped the old King of his bodyguards and dignity. Lear goes into a rage when he is turned away from the castle and sets off with his servant Art. Caught in a storm and shivering, he turns to his servant Art in a moment of transformation, a key line in the whole play basically showing compassion by asking if he is cold. Lear stops focusing on his own pain and becomes concerned about another human being. This is the beginning of his new creation. He gains humility with compassion to love.

A New Heaven and a New Earth

Now back to the Prophet Isaiah. God says, "I am about to create a new heaven and a new earth." Words of hope, a vision, a future, not a return to the past, but a new thing God is doing. Faith is the moment when we say, "I can't and God says, "I can". The confusion comes when we want to recreate the old, and God wants to do a new thing in your life. God invited them, and invites us, to "be glad and rejoice...in what he is creating." King Lear never went back to being King, but through the pain and redemption he discovered that sacrifice is not just about giving up, but taking energy from one part of life and channeling it into another part of life. He discovered the Joy that he and his daughter Cordelia would sing and laugh.

You can experience this new thing God is doing, God wants you to be "glad and rejoice in what he is creating" in your life. This involves leaving the Babylon of your life, the pain of your life, and being open to the new thing God is doing. This is difficult. This is why we call it faith and not understanding, moving from knowledge to trust. You remember the story of Moses and the burning bush. When Moses approached the burning bush, God told him, "Take off your shoes because the ground you are standing is holy ground!" Elizabeth Browning paraphrased God's invitation to Moses "The earth is ablaze with the fire of God, but only those who see it take off their shoes. The rest sit around and pick blackberries." The ground on which you are standing is Holy because God is present in your life. When you relegate God simply to the heaven, you end up picking blackberries.

This morning you can join the parade of those who made their way back from Babylon to Jerusalem. You can be glad and rejoice because you are joy and a delight to God. Recognizing the ground on which you are standing is Holy because God is doing a new thing in your life. When you walk out the door or put this sermon down. I pray your heart will jump with delight as you turn from pain to hope, from disappointment to anticipation, and from darkness to the seeing the fire of God in your life.