

Scripture Readings and Sermon

November 17, 2019 by Rev. Mark Brechin

Commentary on Isaiah 65:17-25 (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

Isaiah can easily be divided into two sections: judgment and mercy. The first section (chapters 1 thru 34) deals with the reasons for the Babylonian exile and the fall of Jerusalem. The second sections (chapters 35, 40-66) give the promise of restoration for the remnant who remain faithful during the exile. The restoration will not, however, be a resumption of the same old way of following the covenant but God will do a "new" thing. In 42:9, the Lord says "See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare" and the people will sing a "new song". This is repeated in 43:19, "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" And in 48:6, "From this time forward I make you hear new things, hidden things that you have not known." These references should be viewed in parallel to the judgment in Isaiah 6:10, "Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed." This is not just a restoration of Jerusalem but of creation which is the focus of this section. The peace of the Garden of Eden shall be restored when the lamb and the wolf feed together. This final vision of Isaiah is God's restoration of the people not just from Babylon but from their state of sin. Revelation 21 reflects this same vision of a new heaven and a new earth.

Commentary on 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13 (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

As Paul concludes his letter, he urges them not to become lazy in the faith. Paul is fighting what is sometimes called "short-timers disease". If Jesus is returning soon, why work or plan for the future. Freed from the "works" of the law, the community in Thessalonica had begun to shift into "idleness" becoming "mere busybodies". For Paul, however, the Good News frees us from "useless works" so that Christians can be free to go into all the world and proclaim Jesus Christ. As Paul ceaselessly traveled and served Jesus in every location he found himself, he urges them to imitate his "evangelical zeal" and become more active rather than less.

Commentary on Luke 21:5-19 (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

The Lectionary reading of the Gospel of Luke ends with Jesus' reflection on the Temple which Luke places just before the Last Supper. Luke is often dated after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D. because of Jesus' statement in verse 6. Others argue that if Luke was the scribe of Paul who died before 67 A.D., the Gospel must have been written before the fall of the Temple. Either way, the message from Jesus is clear. What is made by humans eventually ends but God is the God of eternity. The greatest temple for God's spirit was first built in the Garden of Eden by God. Each of us, as Paul says, is a temple of God. That Temple was perfectly realized in Jesus whom humanity tried to destroy but whom God rose on the third day. Just as they attempted to destroy the message by persecuting and killing Jesus, Jesus warns that his followers will also go through tribulation. God, however, is faithful to those who hold the course. No matter how bad things become, God's love for us endures as we shall endure in Christ.

Sermon "Following God in a Polarized World" (*Sermon Video*)

We live in an increasingly polarized society. The gap appears to be widening between the rich and poor, politically left and right, and the isolationists and globalists. The polarization of society is reflected in religious organizations. While internally within the United Methodist Church the polarity is between acceptance and accountability, externally a rift is forming primarily based on age between the need for religious organizations versus being spiritual but not religious. Many of the arguments that

arise from this polarization are placed in the context of future and past. Fearing the future, there are those who want to retreat into the past and restore some imagined "old order". Then there are those who, being frustrated with those who want to look backwards are urging people to plunge forward into a bold new future. Leading both of these sides are legions of prophets and false messiahs who claim that God is on their side. By making this claim, however, they are in turn claiming that the other side is abandoned by God. They have in a very real sense usurped God's judgment seat in the name of their own form of righteousness.

Jesus warned the disciples to beware of these false prophets. This increasingly polarization who lead to wars and rumors of wars placing neighbor against neighbor and family against family. To claim that God is the only judge and that God is impartial is to incur the wrath of both sides. All those who hold firm to following Jesus and not the self-proclaimed righteous of the world would be persecuted. Jesus does not water down Christianity or proclaim some false prosperity gospel. Jesus states quite clearly the dangers of following him including death. To be my follower, warns Jesus, is just the opposite of popularity. The danger of not following, however, is to loss one's soul to the causes of this world. Therefore, Jesus urges all to endure in the faith and thereby persevere the soul that Jesus has saved.

The Thessalonians, like many Christians, seemed to believe they found a loop-hole. They did not want to loss their souls by joining in the division of their society but they also did not want to suffer for their choice. So what was their option? Do nothing. If Jesus is returning soon, why do I need to place my life on the line? If Jesus freed us, why should I then do something that might imprison me? This train of thought appeared to be gaining strength according to Paul's letter. Paul, however, plainly states that not making a choice is a choice. We are freed by Christ so that we might boldly proclaim the good news of Christ. This news is not a new form of legalism that chooses one side or another. This news is that in Christ, God has chosen everyone who will by faith seek God above their own personal agendas. It is God's world, God's kingdom, and God's rule. If there are those who stray, that is between themselves and God. Followers are called not to be judges but rather to be shepherds who do the good work of Lord.

Stepping out and doing good in a world that seems more content on judging than doing is a dangerous proposition. God, speaking through Isaiah, proclaims that the Lord is doing a new thing and a new creation. New birth, however, is never accomplished without some degree of pain. The old has to be left behind. The old pains and old rivalries must be left behind. All those human constructs that we use to divide us must be released to God. There is no going back to the "good ole days" because our God is a God of the present. There is also no need to fear the future because God has already prepared a way. "Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear." Rather than worrying about the future or day dreaming about the past, God is calling us to reject the duality of our world and instead do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our living Lord today.