

Forever Creating  
Isaiah 65.17-25  
Sunday, November 13, 2016  
Pentecost +26C  
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“Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating.” We have moved in and out of the Prophets for many months now. No matter how many times I encounter their words, they grow in depth, texture, and meaning. Sometimes the prophets are speaking to a people who have forgotten their way and forgotten who they were created to be. In those scenarios, the word is a call to turn and return to the path of God. There are also the exilic calls to return to God for a people who do not believe God can be near to them in a far away place—even when home has been destroyed and families ripped apart and temple walls shattered, God is real and near and present.

And then texts like today speak prophetically into the hopelessness of a people. I love when the prophets take your face in their hands, look you in the eyes, and promise you that they know from the ultimate source of all things that everything is going to be more than alright. Everything is going to be recreated in such a powerful way that you won't even remember the darkness of what is presently broken, devastating, and unjust. When God's people are suffering and hopeless, the prophet assures that not only is God near, but God is busy at work on a new plan—a plan to restore and repair, to rebuild and rededicate. The prophet tells us God's plans bring gladness and rejoicing so powerful that the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind ever again.

I hope you hear some comfort or reassurance in these words, but I predict they are familiar enough that they don't pack the punch they deserve. Carla Sunberg urges us to pay attention to the context into which the prophet is speaking: “The children of Israel had suffered in exile and lost much of their joy. Pregnancy no longer brought hope, but fear. Springtime simply signaled another year to suffer in separation from the promised land. Jerusalem had become a distant memory which was fading with every passing season. The need for hope had never been greater...

The prophet was trying to make a point about the vast scale of God's promise. In a world where half of their children died before reaching the age of five, God promised that there would be no infants who would die. The infant mortality rate would become

zero! For families who grieved the death of their children on a regular basis this was unthinkable.”<sup>1</sup>

God is presently, actively, continually creating. The role of the prophet is to wake us up to this reality and shock our imaginations into seeing and then joining God in that creation. Imagine a world overflowing with gladness and joy. Imagine a world with no weeping and no distress. Imagine long, full lives, warm homes, rich gardens, satisfying work, healthy children. Imagine a world without violence or pain. Imagine an intimacy with God so real that God knows what you are saying before the words can even leave your lips. The prophet calls us to wake up to the dreams of God and then join God in stitching the pieces of that dream into the reality of this one.

This week and next we talk about the concept of the kingdom of God that is both already and not yet. The kingdom where joy and gladness reign, where abundance and peace are real. We hold that kingdom up against the realities of this world, and the process can be painful. This world is not as it should be, and we name that out loud often. And sometimes the pain of a *not as it should be* world is unbearable and we long for a hero leader to come along and fix it all for us. But that is not how the biblical challenge goes. We are called to be people who hope in a forever creating God. We are called to be people who don't just believe that God is always plotting goodness, but also that we are invited and blessed to join God in that work. The work to be done is a divine-human partnership. Now is a time to wake up to that calling and embrace the invitation to work for a kingdom that is both already and not yet.

Carla Sunberg reminds us, “The new Jerusalem [in Isaiah's prophecy] is not governed by the political systems of this world. Again the contrast becomes vast when we recognize that the systems of this world are far from the throne room of God. God is not pacing back and forth, wringing hands over decisions that humans will make here on earth. God is already in the new Jerusalem, safe and secure upon the throne. So vast is the scale, and the kingdom is so great in comparison to earthly powers that nothing can compare. God is already interacting with those who are participating in the kingdom. At the same time, we are not yet living completely in the kingdom. Therefore, we see the imprints of the kingdom now. We can be in the world, and yet, not of the world.

When the things of this world seem oddly out of step with the new Jerusalem, rejoice. Our awareness of the vast contrast means that we are moving into the already of the new kingdom in joyful anticipation of new life.” That is to say, the more we imagine

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.aplainaccount.org/proper-27c-psalm>

God's world as it should be, each time we sense the Spirit in our breath, and the further we walk on the Way of Christ Jesus, the more disenchanted we will be with the broken systems of our world as it is. And the more compelled we will become to work with God to make something new and good in this old place. This process is not easy or simple. When we have one foot in what is and one foot in what will be, we will begin asking more and more questions as we reconcile one to the other.

I've had one such question echoing in my head for over a week now. Eight days ago, Alec Baldwin and Kate McKinnon broke from their characters as presidential candidates on Saturday Night Live and spoke directly to their audience saying, "We cannot tell you how to cast your vote, but we will ask you: What kind of country do you want to live in?"

That question has stuck with me for these eight days. It's a good question, to be sure. I'm also continually fascinated by public challenge and social commentary coming from comedians and satirists. And I'll confess that I am grieved (and with maybe more than a bit of envy) that the voice of the preacher and the church is no longer of much interest to a broad, public audience as I think we have some even better questions to ask.

Asking questions is one of our priorities here at St. Charles—intellectual curiosity, thoughtful challenge, and seeking after an ever-expanding awareness of all things. Maybe the comedians' question is a good one, but it also isn't big enough for our conversation here. Instead, we ask: what kind of world do you want to live in? And at the same time, maybe it needs to be smaller for us, too: What kind of church do you want to help create? What kind of life do you want to live? It always comes back to Mary Oliver, doesn't it? Friends, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?<sup>2</sup>

I don't want to dwell on who is and who is not going to be the next president. Those conversations are happening enough already, and I'm sure you are as fatigued by them right now as I am. Instead, I want for us to harness the energy of this present transition and poignancy of this cultural moment to ask better questions about our world, our nation, our church, and our lives. What passions and projects and causes and relationships are helping draw you more fully into the kind of person you are called to be, the kind of church you are called to create, the kind of nation in which you want to live and plant gardens and raise your children, and the kind of world that reflects what you know to be true of God's best dreams for every one of us? Ask these questions and then act on the answers.

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day"

We need to ask better questions of what comes next because this is our work here as the church. Participating in the creation of a world as it should be is the partnership work to which we are called. And maybe the questions we ask about what we are doing here will challenge our understanding of what church is in some uncomfortable ways. There is a renewal happening in the church, particularly as we know church in the United States, that reflects the prophetic word about a forever creating God. And when something is made new, the old thing is necessarily left behind. Whether we like it or not, the way church looks is changing in a forward direction and will not return to the programmatic heights of the mid-20th-century. And it just so happens that my theological education largely trained me for the church of the 20th century, so you and I are figuring this out in real time together. With God's dreams, the Spirit's power, and Christ's steps as our guide we ask: What kind of church do we want to create here?

So far I predict this much:

We will be less about internal programs and more about community engagement—how are we involved in the lives of our neighbors? how are we listening and connecting? how are we responding when we are asked to respond? how are we participating in the heartbeat of our city and its needs?

We will be less about facility and more about presence—good and wonderful things happen here in this physical building, and it serves both a real and symbolic purpose in our community. And yet we understand that we are the church in the world wherever we find ourselves. We are present to neighbors on the street, present to one another over a cup of coffee, present to the life and needs of our city. We participate in working for good in all of those places because that is the work to which Jesus calls us.

We will expend less energy being polite and more energy being prophetic—we will use our voices for truth-telling and speaking to power, we will be kind in all things but will not avoid hard conversations. Our words, our silence, our prayers, our efforts, our gatherings here and our lives out there will be about the work that our forever creating God is already doing and invites us to join.

“For I am about to create new heavens  
and a new earth;  
the former things shall not be remembered  
or come to mind.  
But be glad and rejoice for ever  
in what I am creating”

Something new is being birthed, and we are feeling the realities of that process. How will you respond? How will you participate in God's holy imagination? How will you use your life to stand witness to the creation of new heavens and new earth? How will we here as a church stand together as citizens of a kingdom we have not yet seen but is more real than anything we have yet experienced?

As we ask all of these things and prepare to respond with the actions of our lives, may we be guided by the prayer of Archbishop Oscar Romero<sup>3</sup> (written by Bishop Ken Untener):

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers-and-devotions/prayers/archbishop\\_romero\\_prayer.cfm](http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers-and-devotions/prayers/archbishop_romero_prayer.cfm)

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

Amen. Amen. Amen.