

Proper 28C

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*The Now and Not Yet Prophetic Promise*

*According to a Jewish legend, long ago there lived two brothers who shared a field and divided the crops equally. One of the brothers was a bachelor, and the other a married man with many children. Once, during the harvest, each of them felt compassion for the other. The bachelor was worried that his brother did not have enough to feed his household. The married brother thought he was fortunate to have children who would care for him in his old age, while his brother would have to depend on what he had saved. In the dark of the night each of them would carry some sheaves of produce to the other's house, and in the morning, each would be astonished to discover that his own supplies had not diminished. This went on for several days and nights, until the two finally met during one of their nocturnal deliveries. Each brother understood what the other had been doing, and they fell into each other's arms in a loving embrace. At that point it was decreed from above that this was the place upon which it would be fitting to establish God's Holy Temple in Jerusalem, epitomizing the values of peace, compassion, and brotherly/sisterly love. \**

The listeners in both Isaiah and Luke's passages would have encountered their prophetic words in the wake of the temple's destruction. The place that had been created as the center of peace and harmony, now had become a symbol of devastation and suffering. When the disciples point to the impressiveness of this holy site, Jesus announces that it will be flattened into rubble. He describes a situation that only moves from bad to worse, including a litany of catastrophic events. As troubling as these images may be to us, those who were the first recipients of Luke's message would have understood them completely. For he was writing his account fifteen years after the Romans seized Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. The earliest followers of Jesus would have been eyewitnesses to this horrific tragedy. Amid these disturbing images, we see that Jesus shifts the focus, telling the disciples not to be afraid; that creation's ultimate end—God and God's kingdom of peace and justice—is guaranteed. Promising them that by standing firm they will experience the fullness of God's kingdom.

Centuries before, Isaiah was offering his own words of hope and endurance, addressing a people languishing in exile, who were longing for the day when they would return to their homeland, rebuild their holy temple to its former glory, and flourish again as God's chosen people. In uplifting language Isaiah promises that God is doing a new thing: creating new heavens and a new earth. The problems and pain, the injustice and suffering will be defeated. Predators and prey will coexist peacefully. No longer must one destroy another to survive in this world. "The old ways—dog eat

dog, human eat human, male against female, race against race, nation against nation — no longer apply,” writes Kim Jin in a *Christian Century* reflection. The original vision set forth by the Jewish legend, creation’s true purpose to bring peace and harmony will be renewed, proclaims Isaiah.

This passage describing the Peaceable Kingdom was popularized by the Quaker preacher-artist Edward Hicks. Hicks was a local boy, born and raised not far from here in Bucks County in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. He painted this idyllic scene sixty-two times, pursuing this subject not for commercial reasons, but for very personal ones – to express his yearning for unity and peace in light of his Quaker beliefs and out of a profound struggle to make sense of the divisiveness and violence of human nature. During Hicks’ lifetime his beloved denomination experienced its first schism. Even amid the artist’s growing disillusionment with the great Quaker experiment he continued to put paint to canvas in his relentless hope that God’s kingdom could be established in the world here and now. Never abandoning his belief in the promise envisioned by Isaiah and restored in the person of Jesus Christ.

Like Edward Hicks or hearers of Isaiah’s and Luke’s prophetic messages, I can sometimes feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the world’s problems. How can it be that it in our city of brotherly love and sisterly affection, an 11-year-old can be shot to death by his 19-year-old brother? How can it be that in our city that produced the Quaker ideals, we have had over a thousand-gun shootings this year alone? How can it be that the Opioid crisis is ravaging our urban and suburban communities? How can it be that a person of color is much more likely to be pulled over for a traffic violation on Easton Road than I am? How can I possibly witness to the good news in a massively troubled world?

It is tempting to want to turn away from the injustice, to think that nothing really can be done when the problems are so systemic, so beyond my control. And yet, it is in the seemingly small acts where I find signs of hope that God’s peaceable kingdom is not out of our reach. In a week Christians, Muslims and Jews will gather at Congregation Kol Ami in prayer and praise. In this one worship service we will reject the fear of the other that pervades our society. And we will celebrate our diversity while worshiping together as one beloved people of God. On the following day young and old will stand side-by-side in our parish hall putting together blessing bags and meals that will be handed out on Thanksgiving morning among our hungry and homeless neighbors. This ministry was started seven years ago by one family who decided to do something small but tangible, in response to the suffering they saw. And now we at St. Peter’s are privileged to participate in this work with them and

many in our wider community. Prayer and service - seemingly small acts that are making a difference in our particular plot of God's holy creation.

"For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth," declares Isaiah. There is ambiguity in how the Hebrew verb can be translated. God will create, God creates, God is creating, God is about to create. God's new creation is happening both now and in the future. Jesus tells us to stand firm and bear witness in the midst of this great ambiguity, the now and not yet prophetic promise of Isaiah. His words orient our vision repeatedly to God's vision no matter the enormity of the world's problems; to both imagine and reclaim God's intention for a just world through all our small acts of prayer, service and witness.

*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 forever  
in what I am creating,  
(what I will create, what I am about to create);  
The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,  
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;  
They shall not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.*

May it be so. Amen.

\**Synthesis Article, Common Lectionary Year C, November 2019.*