

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 and 11:15 Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost – November 17, 2019

“Stay the Course...”

Scripture: Luke 21:5-19, Isaiah 65:17-25; 23 Pentecost C, Proper 28

In the annals of “prophet history,” surely Jesus will go down as the greatest of all time, right? In the Prophet Hall of Fame, he has to be listed as #1. And I’m not at all happy about that! See, the prophetic vision of Jesus we hear this morning — the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the false saviors, the wars and insurrections, the earthquakes and famines and plagues, the persecutions and imprisonments and betrayals— all that happened! Every bit of that came to pass. Jesus was spot on; he’s a prophet batting 1.000. And I don’t want that. It’s Isaiah’s prophecy that I want. It’s the new heavens and new earth, the gladness and rejoicing, the homes and vineyards and happy children, and the long and peaceful life. It’s the wolf and lamb hanging out together... safely. It’s the vegan lion sharing a salad with the ox who finally doesn’t have to worry that it’s about to become dinner. And no snakes! (Apologies to all you herpetological fans out there, but... no snakes. The serpent bites the dust.) Look, Jesus hits the prophetic nail on the head and gets everything right, but it’s Isaiah’s vision we need. Isn’t it? It’s Isaiah’s vision I want.

Don't you? And I figure we're in pretty good company. After all... Jesus wanted it too.

You ever wonder why he did it? Why he walked a way of love? Why he cared for a sometimes dim-witted and needy group of friends? Why he was willing to show compassion to the human riff-raff, to understand the prostitutes, to spend time caring for the sick, and all the while ready and willing to argue with the respectable types, to call them out for being concerned about their holy reputations while being entirely heartless to those most in need of kindness and justice? Why he stayed the course when he was threatened or ignored? Why he asked us to love our enemies? And why, if he had the power, he never used his power to force us or anyone else to his way? Why he was nearly silent before the governor, Pilate? And why at the end of his life, his last act before dying was to forgive? I sure do... wonder, that is. Why did he do it? It doesn't really make sense. Unless... unless you understand that what Jesus wanted was the vision Isaiah saw, and not what his own eyes showed him each and every day in the corrupt and violent and faithless and collapsing society of his time.

I believe Jesus wanted the gladness and rejoicing, the homes and vineyards and happy children, and the long and peaceful life. And maybe even the snakes, if they were willing to behave themselves. Maybe the snakes. And I think he wanted what

was good for all... for all. And the only way to bring about that vision, Isaiah's vision, is the way Jesus walked... on the paths marked forgiveness, patience, humility, joy, generosity, honesty, compassion, gratitude, forbearance. Perhaps humor, longing, friendship, faithfulness, respect, and hope. And all of these encompassed by, bound up in that all too overused yet under-appreciated thing... love.

When Jesus went to Sunday School —and of course for him it would have been Saturday School at the synagogue, right?— he would have met Isaiah. No, not in the flesh; Isaiah lived through his own dangerous and troubled times hundreds of years before Jesus. But Jesus would have heard the very words of Isaiah that we heard this morning, the same vision of goodness, the same vision of peace and prosperity, the same hope that God is always there, just a little beyond our sight, but perhaps not quite beyond our vision, inviting a new world, a new heaven and a new earth, that is a delight. And I also think that Jesus came to understand that the world of Isaiah's prophecy was no figment to be brought about by wishful thinking or to be delivered to us by some heavenly *Federal Express* service. If Isaiah's prophecy is to come to pass, if the world of which Isaiah speaks is to come to fruition, it won't be because God forces it upon us, but because we finally learn to welcome that vision of a world foretold by Isaiah from ancient times. I think Jesus understands that for the vision of

Isaiah to come true, we will have to decide to live our lives like it is true. We have to build the vision here and now.

Look at what is going on. There is no path to lasting peace that is paved by hate, no path to prosperity that is so narrow as to prevent so many from walking it, no path of generosity built by greed, no path leading us to truth and goodness that is forged by lies or brutality or deceit. All these things that we see, all this life around us “...the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.” Unless... unless we take a different path. In the words of that more contemporary of prophets, Bob Dylan:

*“So let us stop talkin' falsely now
The hour is getting late...”¹*

If we want the world Isaiah envisions, we'll need to pray for it, to work at it, to work toward it, like Jesus did. He did not give up the vision... ever, and that comforts me. But just as there is no birth without labor, neither can we partner with God to bring a new world to life without labor. We'll have to persevere in the way of love, even if others may think that foolish. We'll need to ask forgiveness where we have done wrong. We'll have to work together. We'll need to choose and follow leaders who share Isaiah's vision of a just and humble peace. Look, I can't guarantee that

¹ From Bob Dylan, “All Along the Watchtower.”

everybody will come along that way any more than Jesus could guarantee it. But let us not let *that* stop us from trying. And, yes, I think we can use all the divine vision, wisdom, and support we can get. And that's one reason I'm glad we're here... together. We'll need to help carry each other.

You know, the prophecy of Isaiah and the prophecy of Jesus we hear today are to me sort of like two sides on a coin. Both of these great prophets could see both sides of human experience and possibility. It just seems we human beings *live* in the dark times while we *hope* for the good times, the vision Isaiah speaks. But if these two visions we hear today are two sides of a coin, goodness! I hope we don't just flip the coin to see what we will believe about this life or what we will live for. Choose. Choose what you will live for. And if you choose Isaiah's vision, then live into it, every day, in every decision, small or great. And hold onto it as best you can, even when others don't. Isaiah may be a dreamer, but he is no fool. Neither is Jesus. One of these visions brings life, and by our endurance, we will gain our souls.