

A New Creation

“For I am about to create a new heavens and a new earth...be glad and rejoice in what I am creating.” Isaiah 65:17a, 18a.

First Scripture Reading Isaiah 12

Second Scripture Reading Isaiah 65:17-25

This passage from Isaiah 65 is one that we have heard too many times in the last few years here at Westminster and that I have preached at too many funerals. We have buried too many of our members' children and many members who have died too young. It is a passage that is read when we go through those times because it speaks to our hope in God, to the world that God intends for us – a world in which we will never hear the weeping of families because of the loss of loved ones who have not lived out their full lifetime. And that hope is so important to us, particularly when we are in the midst of some of the grief-filled occurrences in our lives. However, there is so much more to be said about this passage than the hope it gives us for some future time when God's kingdom will be fully realized on the earth.

The first evidence we have that there is more to this is in the initial verse of Isaiah 65. The verb tense about God's new creation is not clear. Kate Givens Kime, writing in “The Christian Century,” points out: “In the Hebrew, the ambiguity of the verb tense has prompted a wide variation in translations: God will create, God created, God is creating, God is about to create a new heavens and a new earth. This is a moment when the original language offers us a fresh view. The timing of God's new creation is *ambiguous*, a word that come from the Latin *ambo*, meaning ‘both.’ God's new creation is happening both now and in the future.”¹

It seems to me there are three places where it is possible for us to understand God's creating power at work in our lives. The first is in our very selves. We all have times when we do things and we look back and we think, I can't believe I said or did that. We all have things we wish we did better in order to live, not only as God's children in the world, but God's “good” children. In the above mentioned article, Kate Kime says that one way for us to interpret this text “is to recognize the precarious powers (and potential for peace) that we all carry. Tending to our inner warfare – to the power-hungry lions within us that tear into our inner insecure lambs – is hard work, but in this way, we join God in imagining our world, both inner and outer, both present and future, into hopeful reconciliation.”²

When we take care of some of our own inner turmoil, we are better equipped to participate in the second place where we can be active in God's creative work in the world. This happens every time we treat another person with the love and generous kindness that we have all been created with the capacity to share. We do that, individually and corporately in so many ways within our church. Our COMPASS program, where we work with our sisters and brothers from Central Baptist Church to provide food and educational assistance for some of God's most needy children is one beautiful and obvious example. But there are so many others. We have members who take meals to the Helping Hands Shelter once a month. Our Elizabeth Circle was named Volunteer of the Month by Contact Ministries. We have members who help drive people to doctor appointments and bring meals to people after they have been hospitalized. The list goes on and on.

It is easy to become overwhelmed by the needs of humanity. It is easy to become despondent over the state of the world and to begin to wonder if Isaiah's words were just wishful thinking. It is

¹ “The Christian Century”, November 13, 2013: “Living by the Word – Sunday, November 17,” Kate Givens Kime, p. 20.

² Ibid.

easy to become pulled in by the falsehood that we cannot really make a difference. But we can and we do, as Mary Eleanor Johns states so eloquently in her article on this passage in Feasting on the Word. She reminds us that, "We are able to give one drink of cold water at a time. We are able to bring comfort to the poor and the wretched, one act of mercy or change at a time. One book given, one friendship claimed, one expression of love, one can of beans, one moment of commendation, one confession of God's presence but for the asking, one moment in which another person is humanized rather than objectified, one challenge to the set order that maintains injustice, one declaration of the evil that is hiding in plain sight, one declaration that every person is a child of God: these acts accumulate within God's grace."³

We participate in that accumulation with every act of kindness, mercy and understanding that we do. Sometimes we are aware that we are acting in ways that will bring relief or renewal and sometimes we don't.

Several years ago, a schoolteacher, who served on special assignment with children confined in a large city hospital, received a routine call requesting that she visit a particular child who had been admitted and would require a long stay. She took the boy's name and room number - 409 - and was told by the boy's regular teacher, "We're studying nouns and adverbs now. This boy needs help so he will not fall behind."

It wasn't until the visiting teacher reached the boy's room that she realized it was located in the hospital's burn unit. No one had prepared her to confront a boy who had been horribly burned over much of his body and who was in great pain. She wanted to turn on her heel and walk out, but she stammered, "I'm the hospital teacher, and your regular teacher asked me to help you with nouns and adverbs."⁴

Because of his condition, the boy could barely respond. The teacher stumbled through the grammar lesson, but felt guilty for asking the boy questions or trying to correct him.

The next morning, however, this teacher ran into a nurse on the burn unit who asked her, "What did you do to that boy in 409 yesterday? The teacher started to apologize, but the nurse interrupted: "You don't understand. We've been concerned about him. But ever since you were with him yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back, responding to treatment, like he wants to live."

The boy himself later explained with tears rimming his eyes, "I had given up. At the lowest moment, the teacher came into my room. I suddenly realized that they wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy, would they? I decided I wanted to get well, if they thought I could. So I prayed, asking God to help me want to live. And here I am."⁴

The teacher had no idea the difference she would make in that child's life, but in the act of simply doing her job, her compassion gave a severely injured child hope and the will to keep going.

The third way we participate in God's creating power in the world is corporately. Here at Westminster that happens through our worship, our fellowship and our work together on Session, the Board of Deacons, all of our committees and circles. When we come together in all of those ways, and in others, we are able to bring our individual gifts of care and compassion in ways that add to the accumulation of God's grace that Mary Eleanor Johns talks about.

³ Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors. "Isaiah 65:17-25, Pastoral Perspective," Mary Eleanor Johns, p. 292.

⁴ Story found in Homileticonline.com.

At the end of our service today, (the 10:00 Sunday service) we will have a congregational meeting during which we will elect new elders and deacons, nominating and strategic planning committee members and a new Associate Pastor Nominating Committee whose work will be to call an Associate Pastor for Family, Youth and Children's ministries. All of the three ways we have talked about participating in God's creating power in the world have come into play in the decisions people have made to say 'yes' when called and the work they will do together in the months and years ahead.

God's new creation – the new heavens and the new earth – the world that we long for will come to be in God's time. But we don't have to just wait for it to happen at some unknown point in the future. Because it is also, here and now, within each of us personally, in the actions that we carry out in God's name and for the sake of God's children in the world, and in the work we do together as the body of Christ. We are not capable of fully understanding it, but we are blessed to be able to participate in it. Amen.