

Sunday, November 16, 2025
Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 28C)
Isaiah 65.17-25; Luke 21.5-19
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Toward New Heavens and a New Earth”

On any given Sunday, the scripture readings—especially the Old Testament and the Gospel readings—are generally in alignment thematically. The framers of our lectionary—the list of assigned readings for the day—have purposefully selected Old Testament passages that, to some extent, exemplify or enhance the Gospel reading. Or vice versa. But that certainly does not seem to be the case today. As we near the end of our liturgical year, both our Old Testament and Gospel readings point to visions of what is to come: to an “end time,” to an end of the present reality documented by Isaiah and by Luke. And yet, the entire theme of this metaphorical “end times” as it were—what that “end time” will look like—is thrown into a tailspin.

In our Old Testament reading, the Prophet Isaiah conveys God’s promise to the Israelites exiled in Babylon: “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth.” He goes on to say, “Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.” Providing words of encouragement to those in exile that they will be liberated. Promising a new exodus, not unlike the original exodus from Egypt. Only this time, it will be on a grander scale. This exodus, this new reality, will be nothing short of a cosmic event: new heavens and a new earth. All of creation will be made new and perfect and whole!

And then we have today’s reading from Luke’s Gospel, in which Jesus gives a completely different vision of what is to happen. When his disciples comment on the beauty and magnificence of the Temple in Jerusalem, Jesus responds, “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.” Foretelling the destruction of the Temple, which is not only God’s abode on earth, but also the social, religious, and political center of the Jewish world. Essentially foretelling the destruction of their whole way of life as they have known it. And as if foretelling the destruction of the Temple is not enough, Jesus goes on to foretell of the persecution, struggle, shame, betrayal, suffering, arrest, imprisonment, and even execution of his followers. A far cry from the Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight that God promises in Isaiah.

The disciples must have been devastated upon hearing Jesus’ foretelling of the future. Things were already looking bleak, to say the least. At this point in the Gospel narrative, Jesus has already told them three times of his impending death and resurrection. Even so, there were signs of hope. Just a few days before, Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem to shouts of “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” Giving the disciples hope that their Messiah would indeed turn things around. That there would be a messianic deliverance not unlike what Isaiah had foretold. The ushering in of a new age, complete with new heavens and a new earth. Recreating “Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.” All ruled by a new king, the Messiah. But now, Jesus doubled down on his previous foretelling of his death and resurrection. And it was starting to look like he was going to take them with him.

Little could they know or even begin to comprehend that this was all part of the plan. That through Jesus, God was changing the game. God was redefining the role of Messiah in the person of Jesus. He had not come to conquer the world, as the disciples and so many others had hoped, but rather to save it. The end result would be the same: new heavens and a new earth. A world transformed. A world liberated. A world redeemed and saved. Just that it would happen in an unconventional way.

In this, his last sermon before his Passion, Jesus delivers the difficult truth about the life-changing work, the world-changing work, that God was doing through him and through his followers. True transformation, true liberation, true salvation, would require more than just changing the externals. It would require more than just changing the landscape, social, religious, and political. It would necessitate a fundamental change in the hearts and minds, in the very lives, of the people. Of those who follow Jesus. That those who follow Jesus would need to follow him all the way. Even to the cross. At least, metaphorically.

In a few days' time, Jesus would complete his earthly journey. In ways not unlike what he foretold would befall his followers. A way that would include persecution, struggle, shame, betrayal, suffering, arrest, imprisonment, and even execution. For Jesus, this would be in the form of his Passion, his Crucifixion.

Three days later, the empty tomb would herald the dawn of a new era in salvation history. The Risen Christ would chart a new path. One unlike any that had been followed before. One that ultimately would lead to new heavens and a new earth. But first, the hard work of achieving that vision would begin. It would begin with the work of those who chose to follow him all the way on his journey. It would not be an easy way. As he had told them, just as his path was one characterized by persecution, struggle, shame, betrayal, suffering, arrest, imprisonment, and execution, so too, would be their way. The only difference would be that while he had no one to show him the way, his followers did. While he had to walk that way alone, his followers would not. They had the Risen Christ. They had his example. They had his teachings. They had his assurance that "I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict."

The subsequent trajectory of the Jesus Movement bore out Jesus' words to his disciples that day on the steps of the Temple, mere days before his Passion. As we know from the Acts of the Apostles, the record of the early years of the Church, Jesus' predictions would indeed come to pass. Early Christian communities did experience persecution, struggle, shame, betrayal, suffering, arrest, imprisonment, and even execution. And yet, they survived. Thanks to their faith. Thanks to their persistence. Thanks to their knowledge that the Risen Christ was with them, supporting them, and guiding them through their trials and tribulations.

As time went on, what had once been a radical, subversive movement became more mainstream. Even being adopted as the official religion of the very empire that had once persecuted its followers and sought to wipe Christianity off the face of the planet and to erase the name of Jesus Christ from the annals of history. Even so, the conditions that Jesus warned his followers about did not completely disappear. Throughout history, there continued to be

moments of persecution, struggle, shame, betrayal, suffering, arrest, imprisonment, and even execution. Despite that, we have continued to survive. We have thrived, becoming the largest and most influential religion in the world.

And yet, persecution, struggle, and yes, even occasionally shame, because of bearing the name of Jesus Christ, do still continue to this day. Indicating the envisioned transformation and liberation have yet to be fully realized. We even see it in our own time and in our own society. We have just lived through the longest shutdown in our nation's history. While not a direct result of an attempt to persecute Christians, many aspects and results of the shutdown revealed we have a long way to go to fully live into and embody the values preached, lived out, and commanded by Jesus. That we, as a nation that professes to be a Christian nation, that professes to be based on Christian values, has a long way to go to actually live into and fully embody those values. Indicating that, in many ways, Jesus' warning two thousand years ago, is still applicable.

The last seven weeks, with the longest government shutdown in our nation's history, has shown that earthly powers and priorities are still alive and well, and still contending against and trying to defeat the values Christ lived and died for. Jesus freely fed the masses, while our government cruelly withheld food from 42 million people who rely on assistance to feed themselves and their families. Jesus freely healed the sick and infirmed, while our government is not willing to provide necessary affordable health care to millions. Jesus continually sought to embrace all people for who they were, to lift people up and enable them to live with respect and dignity, while the actions of our government continually seek to tear people down because of race, place of birth, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and political beliefs.

And it's not just our own government. We see similar actions occurring around the globe. Further proof that we have a long way to go to realizing the vision of new heavens and a new earth God expresses in Isaiah.

At the same time, we see countless people fighting back in the name of Christ. People taking to the streets in protest. People publicly voicing their concerns. People demonstrating their displeasure at the ballot box. And people stepping up their donations to food pantries to provide additional help to our brothers and sisters who are in need. These are but a few ways of putting the Gospel into action. These are but a few examples of living Jesus' commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. These are living examples of what Jesus said to his disciples on those steps of the Temple: "This will give you an opportunity to testify."

That is what we are called to do. To testify in Christ's name. To demonstrate in word and deed what it means to live the Gospel. To demonstrate what it means to be true followers of Christ. As he notes, it is not easy work. But it is the work we have been called to do by virtue of our baptisms, by virtue of being members of the Body of Christ. And as he also noted, there will be times when "You will be hated by all because of my name," particularly when we have the courage to speak out and to act in ways that express Christ's love. But we do so, knowing that he is with us. Trusting, as Jesus told his disciples, "By your endurance you will gain your souls." Knowing that what we do in Christ's name is one small part of the overall work God is doing to create new heavens and a new earth.