

Sermon, Kay Welsch

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Isaiah 65:17-25

Faith Mennonite

Ways of Peace: a Reversal of Fortune

Today's scripture is among some of the most beautiful poetry in the Old Testament. Isaiah writes of a new heaven and a new earth—a vision of such beauty that it almost takes our breath away. I am about to create new heavens and a new earth. All the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. And then the poet goes on to list just the very things that they won't remember. A poet's device if there ever was one—if you want to make sure that people remember just tell them that they won't forget it. And so Isaiah lists all the things, going way back to the Exodus. No more infants will die; people will live long, long lives. (Very long lives—a bit of hyperbole here.) No more will people build homes and other people live in them; nor till the land and have another reap the fruits of their labor. They will not bear children for calamity., And then the prophet says, "Before they call, I will answer, while they are yet speaking, I will answer."

God will answer the prayers before the prayers are even spoken. What a reversal this is. A far cry, from the Israelites' other experiences. From the book of Lamentation—God is not listening. Away doing something else, perhaps. Or some of the Psalms: : Oh, God, answer me, do not refuse to hear me, Psalm 86, Hear my prayer, O God, give ears to the words of my mouth. Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy.

God will be ready and waiting to listen, to speak and to act—even before the prayers are uttered. The lion will lie down with the cattle, a vision of the peaceable kingdom. They shall not hurt or destroy on all my mountain.

This is such a beautiful passage. So different than the world that you and I find ourselves.

As I read this passage, I got to wondering how some of the people in the world who are exiles might hear this passage. The people in Iraq who are exiles in their own land, or those who are in Jordan, unable to find work, living in camps—or the woman, a Shiite, whose picture I saw in the New York Times. She returned to her village, found her house, a pile of rubble, destroyed by the Sunnis who are now in charge of their security and protection; How does this woman go home? And live in the community again? Or the Palestinians whose olive groves have been destroyed to make way for settlements or for the wall—designed to keep the Israelites safe. Almost every day we read in the paper about the Palestinian protests against this wall. My friend, Don Christensen spent three months in Palestine, on an accompaniment program, as he went with a mother who took her children to school every day—went through the blockade, and had to wait the whole day while her children were in school because it would take too much time for her to go back and forth. Or the millions the other exiles in our world, hoping against hope that one day they will be able to return home.

On Sunday, I went to an interfaith service of prayers and blessings for the people of Tibet, those people whose land has been occupied by the Chinese and who have suffered great human rights violations, including suppression of their

religion. One of the Tibetans who has been in exile for over 20 years, said that he hoped 10 years ago, to be able to return to Tibet, but, he is still waiting, still hopeful. He is committed to peace, but how long must he wait. I have no idea how someone who was exiled from their homeland might hear this scripture—or what it would be like to lose the land—although I know that my in-laws lost a farm in the depression. Was that comparable? I don't think so.

The reality is that when Isaiah was written, the Israelites were back from Babylon; they had returned in their home country—but when they got back, they didn't find an empty land, just waiting for them to settle—nor did they return as the heroes, as they had anticipated—those people who remained behind were not the highly educated, or the artisans, they were the lower classes and did the best they could, practicing their religion as best they could. So, when the exiles returned, they did not get the ticker tape parade, the hero's welcome.. They had to learn to live together.

About a month ago, Delane and I watched a 1945 movie; *The Best Years of Our Lives*. The film was made in 1945—won a lot of Oscars. The movie is probably older than most of the people in this congregation. The story is about 3 soldiers who are coming home. One has a family—and they have grown and changed while he has been gone—he is a stranger in his house. Dana Andrews returns to find that he doesn't know his wife--a woman he was married to for only a few days before he was called up, and he learns that she is a party girl—and as long as he has party money, things are all right . But only job he can get is in the same drug store where he worked before, making malts and ice cream

sodas. And his boss is a young kid who never went to war. The third soldier is a vet who has lost both of his arms—and has been fitted out with hooks—he is afraid that his girl friend won't want to marry him now that he's a cripple—and then when she is open to being with him, he doesn't believe her.

I can understand why it was produced in 1945—the year the war ended when the men came back, couldn't find work and had such a hard time adjusting to life after the war. As if this were only the problem of the World War II veterans—we are only beginning to see the true costs of the Vietnam War and the Iraq war—in the mental health issues and the terribly wounded veterans who return.

Some of us have had the experience of working or living in a developing country and find upon returning to the United States that our perspective has changed. I remember coming back from China twenty years ago—we had been living in a pretty remote village in Chungking province and in that village nothing—absolutely nothing was wasted. Night soil went onto the fields, even rag pickers combed the dumps—rags could be used for something—and old papers and newspapers made into sacks that held hot peanuts. So, when returned to the U.S. I so aware of how many choices we had and what a wasteful society we live in—I remember, in particular, being appalled at the amount of packaging on everything. But to be honest, little by little, that experience faded, and I started to take for granted all this abundance for granted—including that packaging that I am able now, thankfully, to recycle. And little by little, returned to life as usual.

Another accompaniment story. This one from the 1980s. A pastor from a Baptist church in New Orleans worked in El Salvador, with refugees who were hoping to return to their homes. Their first day, they were stopped by the military, held at gunpoint and threatened, and they realized that the Salvadorans faced this type of harassment every day. By walking with the folks, the pastor said he was able to join them in finding ways to respond to the terror they were experiencing. For him, accompaniment was a life-changing experience. He reflects, "The illusion of self-reliance and authority was stripped away. I read and heard the scriptures differently. I could never completely return to life as I had known it." One of the Salvadorans said to him, "It must really be hard to be a Christian in the United States. Here our situation is very unjust, but our choices are very clear. Where you live, the decisions are much less clear." Indeed they are.

So—how do we live Isaiah's vision, as if it is a vision—and not just a fairy tale. Every day we open the paper and see atrocities in every single part of the world—injustice, inhumanity, And to be honest, we are absolutely overwhelmed by the needs of the world. What can we do?

William Sloan Coffin, the influential preacher of Riverside Church and activist, was a wonderful writer and I remember his saying, "Amos wrote, let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream.: But Coffin said, it's up to us to figure out the plumbing. We have to keep working for the vision. My friend who just returned from the Philippines visiting some of his

friends in Mindanao, asked his friend how they keep going—and don't lose heart. His friend replied, We owe it to our children. How could I ever explain to my children if I gave up.

We also can't give up because of our children. And I know that there are lots of children here at Faith Mennonite. We want to make a better world for them. So what if we read Isaiah as if it were written to us:--exiles here in the United States who long for that vision not only for the world, but for our country and our communities.

When pictures of Abu Grabib are sent all over the world and we are horrified that this could have happened and even more appalled to find that no one in command was punished. When we learn that torture is condoned by our government, and often outsourced. Not to mention Guantamano Bay—which is now conducting its first trial—in secret. And we see the immigrants, working in horrific conditions in Postville, Iowa, in a kosher meatpacking plant rounded up, jailed and then deported—making it impossible for them to ever return to the U.S. because of their criminal record. And no one in the meatpacking company suffers repercussions for the appalling work conditions. It's easy for me not to lose heart. Our country has lost a great deal of moral authority—how can we possibly talk about another country's human rights abuses.

I am an exile in my own country.

So what to do? We have to start where we are. Not all of us can go on an accompaniment program, like Hannah Breckbill, who will be speaking to you in a couple of weeks, or join the people who bussed to Postville last week to

protest, or join marches in Washington or at the School of Americas. Folks, there is enough for us to do right here in our communities to make them safe places for us and our children. Perhaps there are even opportunities here in the Seward neighborhood.. Last Sunday my minister preached on the parable of the mustard seed—small as it is—and said that God is the one who gives the bounty—all we can do is scatter those seeds of love, compassion and resistance, and trust that God, the one who answers our prayers, before we even utter them, will produce a bountiful harvest.

One Wednesday night a group of us were at Trotter's the restaurant over at Cleveland and Marshall and quite a few people walked in that we knew—they had been protesting at the Marshall Street bridge—every Wednesday, rain or shine, they are there—to protest. A small thing. Maybe so, but it is a witness of resistance—and very important in the scheme of things.

One last thought. That business of God's holy mountain. I don't know how many of you have seen the movies, produced in Mongolia—there are two of them: The tale of the weeping camel, and the Cave of the Yellow Dog. They are beautiful movies—about the Mongolian family that lives in a yurt—grazing their animals nearby. In one of the movies, the land has become overgrazed, so it is time for the family to pack and move on. And right before the family leaves, they bow down to the earth and thank the earth for sustaining them for that period of time. Blessing and thanking the earth. Maybe one way we can live this vision is to live as though you and I are actually living on God's holy mountain. This earth we have—is God's holy mountain and we are privileged to live on it and thus

must take care of it, Again, to save it for our children, our children's children,
unto the seventh generation.

Live as though Isaiah's vision were a reality. Live as though the Kingdom
of God is right here. Right now. Amen.