

Branching Out into The World: *Isaiah 65:17-25*

Norwalk Christian Church, November 11, 2016, Sunday after Election, Stewardship Series 3, Commitment Sunday, Year C, Proper 28

I had planned to preach another passage this week, keeping with the theme of the last two Sundays of preaching from prayers of the Apostle Paul, but I read this scripture earlier in the week and could not get these images out of my mind.

New heavens. New earth. No more weeping; no more distress. Long, fulfilled lives. One who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth. Building a home and then living in it all your days. Planting a garden and then harvesting from it the rest of your life. And, especially this one, the wolf and the lamb shall feed together.

Beautiful, isn't it? It's not hard to understand why these words from a Jewish prophet over 500 years before Jesus has captured the imagination of the people of God for thousands of years.

A new heavens and a new earth. I can almost imagine it.

And yet...and yet I can't. I almost get there, and then something happens in the world as it is. I hear weeping; cries of distress. Someone too young dies. Someone who thought they had good years left, spends their retirement years fighting cancer and confusion. Someone builds a house, but loses a job, and the bank takes it away. Someone works and works--their hands calloused from their labors--but the harvest never comes.

And the wolf and the lamb do not feed together--they feed on each other.

A new heavens and a new earth: I can almost imagine it. And yet...

It's been a hard year in our country, and no election will take it away. One thing is clear from the election results--no matter who won--we have all lost so much. Because we are so very divided as a community. 1% here, 1% there, and you can swing an entire election.

But this isn't about who voted for whom...long before votes were cast, we were so divided. We talk past each other. We experience pain, yet are unaware of our neighbor's pain. We sit in rooms and on pews together, yet never share our lives.

We talk at each other and past each other and about each other, but we do not talk to each other. Be it wolves or lambs, or donkeys or elephants, we do not eat at table together. We devour one another.

But this vision in Isaiah 65 shows us that the way the world is is not God's vision for how it should be.

Now, tradition suggests that Isaiah 65 was written after the people of Judah returned from exile. And, as the story's been told, after years of being strangers in a foreign land, having no home of their own, no place to worship, no hope of a future, they were released. And they were promised by their leaders that once they got home, that Israel would be restored to all it's greatness. What they found, instead, was a lot of hard work.

Their institutions were destroyed. The temple was in ruins. Their homes were unrecognizable. And despair set in. They begged God for a quick fix, for a hero--a Messiah--who would show up, and miraculously make it all better.

But the quick-fix Messiah never showed up. What they got, instead, was a prophet, who gave them this a vision of a new world--the world as it should be--and then called on them to make it a reality.

That's what a prophet is, a bridge between this vision of the World As It Should Be, and the the World As It Is, where we live among the ruins of past dreams.

The prophet looks at the world as it is doesn't simply say, hold on, it will be alright in the sweet by and by, just hold hands, sing Kum-by-ya, and God will fix it--one day. Your preacher may say that, but not the prophet. The prophet says, here is the vision of a new world, now go out and make it happen.

This past week in our schools here in Norwalk, I heard of stories of youth being called homophobic slurs right to their face. Of a 9th grade girl being sexually harassed by another student, casually in the hallway, using words he heard on TV. And I heard of a refugee student being told to "Go Home." That is not okay.

And it's not okay that in the midst of the affluence of our community, that kids still go to bed hungry at night. And it's not right that a family has to decide to pay rent or pay the car payment. And it's not right that hopes are dashed by mountains of debt. And it's not okay that those with mental illness have nowhere to go for help. And it's not right that our women and men who put their lives on the lines for our country, are then given no support for the scars their service has left them with. And it's not okay that we feel hopeless about the possibility of things being different.

And it may sound political, but I'm only catching the vision of Isaiah 65. Our world doesn't need more politicians, our world needs prophets, people with one foot in the world as it should be, casting the vision of a new heavens and a new earth, and one foot right here, where we live, not waiting for someone else to do it, but getting down into the dirt of this earth and making the vision a reality. This is our task.

We are called to be the prophets.

The good news, today, is we're already doing the work. Just stop by youth group every Wednesday night, and see people like our youth group sponsors, Mark, Amy, Janine, Randy and Teresa, who give an evening every week to provide a safe place for our teens. Talk to people like Hannah, who when she hears someone say hateful speech in the hallway at school, speaks out, and stands with those who have been attacked.

Or people like Becky, Betsy, Brandon, Dan, and Margo on the Outreach Committee who have caught a vision of our church becoming more connected, much like the first Christians who met together in homes, and helped one another whenever anyone had need. They are planning to hold small group conversations the first of this year with 200 Norwalk Christian members to build relationships--to actually talk to each other about what's going on in our lives--and find ways to work together to make our community better.

Or people like Susan and Connie who volunteer regularly at the Food Pantry. Or Richard who delivered 30 boxes of food to our elementary schools two weeks ago so kids could have food over the weekend. Or people, whose names I'm not allowed to say, who are secret givers, helping out people who are in need.

People who feel a call to service, who step out, cross lines, give time and money and sweat and tears to spread the love and hope of Jesus.

Now, we have called today Commitment Sunday. And I'll be honest with you, this is not the sermon I was supposed to preach today. Preachers are supposed to guilt you into giving more. But we don't hand out guilt here.

Because here's what I believe: that if we catch the vision of God, our giving will go up, because we're investing in the work that needs to be done. And if we catch the vision of God, we will give to support it, because we don't want our leaders to feel held back or limited because funds are tight. We don't want to end this year with a deficit, when we could each give more--even \$5 or \$10 more a so we can end the year with a surplus. And we don't want to look at giving trends continuing to go down in 2017, because we got a lot of work to do, and we don't need a lack of resources to stand in our way of doing what God has called us to do.

Because I believe, once you catch that vision, you can't help but get to work to make it happen. To give of your time, talents, *and* your treasures to make sure God's work is done.

And I want to give you an invitation. If you want to be a part of making those 200 conversations happen that the Outreach committee is planning, where we grow stronger in our relationships and hear what is really going on in each other's lives, then come back here this Wednesday, 6pm. We're going to be planning it, and we need more help.

In a moment as we sing, our Deacons will come by and hand you out a card. This card is your chance to reflect on your commitment to this church. How will you use your life: your time, talents, and treasures to join with God in creating a new world.

We can't sit this out. People are hurting. Families are suffering. And I believe, with all my heart, that the world needs a "Movement for wholeness in a fragmented world." I believe the world needs a table, where all are welcome.

What we do here, together, is so important. Here, we are equals--here, no matter our differences, we can still come to the table as one. But our table shouldn't be kept in here. This is a message that must be shared, in our communities and our schools, as we branch out from here into the world, setting a new-kind of table, where wolves and lambs can dine together, where neighbors can lay down their partisan yard signs and have a meal, where people who hurt and who dream and who wish for a better life can work together, through the power of God, to make it so.

"For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth," says the Lord. It's coming. Are you ready for it? Are you ready to work for it? Are you committed to make it happen?

Invitation Song:

Don:

At the Table:

Beautiful People, welcome to the Table of the Lord. This is not our table; it is Christ's table, and no one can stand in the way of Christ's invitation to all. No matter who you are or what you've done or where you are on faith's journey, you are welcome here.

In a moment, all who are able will be invited to come forward to receive communion. And we ask as you come, you do two things. First, you may bring your offering for this Sunday and place it in the plates at the front of the center aisle. But also, I ask you to bring that commitment card, if you're ready to do so. Beside each communion server will be a basket on the floor, and I ask you to just drop your card in that basket as another offering today.

Maybe you're not yet ready to complete the card, and you need some more time to think and pray. That's okay. We will have a place for you to return the cards next week, as well. And, hey, we're Disciples--you don't have to do anything. If filling out a card is not your speed, that's okay, too.

However you do it, on a card, in the privacy of your heart, make some sort of commitment today. Prayerfully challenge yourself to branch out in some way, to someone, through your time and talents and treasure, through your kind words and just action. May we all branch out from this table, as we take the hope of Christ into this whole world.

Let us sing verse 3 of "Here I Am, Lord" as we prepare to meet Christ and one another at this table.