

The Church Reborn, part 2

Isaiah 65:17-25 Luke 21:5-19

We are living between a rock and a hard place, between a promise and a warning, between the past and the future. We are living in a new age of the Church with 2000 years of church history behind us and a third millennium stretching out in front. In the case of Crossroads Church, the congregation I serve as pastor, we have almost a dozen years of church history behind us and a lucky year thirteen approaching.

The Hebrew prophet offered words of comfort, hope, and promise to a remnant who braved the fear and challenges of returning to Jerusalem seventy-five years after the world ended, after the destruction of Jerusalem and of Solomon's temple. After two generations of Jews had lived in first Babylon (present day Iraq) and then Persia (present day Iran), some of the grandchildren of a conquered and devastated people going home again with little more than a dream, but what a dream!

Isaiah offered a dream with many components. God is going to recreate Jerusalem as a joy and the people of Jerusalem as a delight. No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live 100 years, but a place of permanence where people will build houses and actually get to live in them. People will plant vineyards and be there to enjoy the fruit of their work. It will be a place where no one will labor in vain, a place where parents can know their children will grow up and be safe and be better off than their parents. And it will be a place of peace where even the wolf and the lamb feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; where all creation will exist in harmony. Does that dream resemble anything you dream now for your own life? How about for our society?

Promises like Isaiah's always seem to be in the future. They're easier to keep that way. In terms of fulfilling them, we're not quite there yet either in Jerusalem or closer to home. But remember, God does not live in the future and neither do we. So, these promises are not only a dream for the future, but even more importantly, a dream of the present. This is a vision of now for us, every bit as much as for that remnant returning to Israel 2500 years ago.

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus was speaking as he stood in front of Jerusalem Temple. It was so spectacular, awe-inspiring, and huge that it dwarfed Solomon's Temple. It had the look of an almost eternal edifice just 500 years after the remnant had returned from captivity, after they had begun to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. Isaiah's promise of a new creation in Jerusalem, at least in terms of the Temple, seemed to have come true.

But the author of Luke's gospel knew a different reality. He was writing some fifty years after Jesus' life and ministry. Luke knew that the temple had been already been destroyed, burned to ground (70CE) along with much of Jerusalem. The exception to this destruction was the West Wall if the Temple that still stands in Jerusalem today. Otherwise, not one stone was left on top of another. Jesus' words to the disciples was a recounting of the history of those fifty years between Jesus' death and destruction of Jerusalem. Do you remember his warning? There would be wars, natural calamities, and personal and family betrayal. Amid this destruction, there would be opportunities to testify about faith in Jesus. Followers of Jesus would be facing the reality of persecution and even death. But during that persecution, there was the promise that "you are safe and secure."

These words were not so much a warning for the future as a sober assessment of the present for Luke. They are words of discomfort, even affliction, for us every bit as much as for Jesus' disciples--every bit as much as for community hearing Luke's gospel for the first time. These words of affliction are for us now just as Isaiah's vision of hope is for us here and for now.

We are the church, people who are choosing to be on the journey to know ourselves, to trust each other, and to discover and do what brings us life. The authentic church is people choosing to do what brings unity, peace, and justice to the world we touch. We are choosing to live by faith that God is One, that we are One--One with God, One with Christ, One with each other. We recognize a calling to trust and live within the truth of who we are, to live and to act according to that truth. We recognize a calling to comfort the afflicted and also to afflict the comfortable--including, but not limited to, ourselves.

We are on a journey to live in the present, to find our comfort in the now when all past hurts find healing and when all future traumas cease to have power over us. We are on a journey to embrace our oneness with all creation, our oneness in the creator, and with the creator. And we are the creators of the vision we see. God and we together dream the dream that emerges from the holy space within us and between us, and takes life.

Where are we going on our journey? We're going nowhere and everywhere. Journey is a way of living that calls us to be here, that calls us to live now, living to embrace the divine presence inside us and to dignify that same divine presence in each other.

We are not traveling somewhere on the journey as much as learning to live more openly, learning to trust the wonder of who God is and who we are. We are traveling to that same realization that swept up the 14th-century Christian mystic Meister Eckhart. Though a faithful member of the Church, he did not consider faithfulness a matter of agreeing with all its theology. He wrote this:

I find nothing more destructive to the well-being of life than to support a god that makes you feel unworthy and in debt to it. I imagine erecting churches to such a strange god will assure endless wars.... A god that could frighten is not a god, but an insidious idol and weapon in the hands of the insane. A god who talks of sin is worshipped by the infirm....

And later wrote this: "It is a lie—any talk of God that does not comfort you."

I believe our journey as the Church, and individually members of it, is to be swept up as Meister Eckhart was, as Ghandi and King were when it came to active non-violence, and as Mother Teresa was when it came to ministering to the dying. Our journey is to give ourselves away and to find ourselves. It is to let go what we always thought was essential to life and open ourselves to be changed from the inside out. Our journey is to die and to be reborn.

A congregation such as Crossroads Church has an opportunity to represent the new life of God's "Kingdom," to be a living, breathing message of what Jesus was talking about. But what will that look like? How will we live as an effective Word in this time and place?

How are we supposed to do all this stuff? Like most things in life, there are small steps that start us moving, then bigger steps we choose to take as we get more sure of ourselves. It really can be kind of fun. First, you need to make an appointment pretty much every day. This is an appointment to spend a little time with yourself, to enjoy being in your own company. When you do this awhile, you can start to enjoy it. Amazingly, you'll discover that God is there with you and has been there all along because God enjoys spending time with you, too.

Then make another appointment, maybe not every day, but when you can. Spend some time with other people, some people you know really well. This needs to be good quality time to listen well and share bravely. You can start with someone you feel really comfortable with or maybe you'd prefer someone you don't know so well. You can hear some of their story and share some of yours. When you do this, you can actually start to enjoy it. Amazingly, you'll discover that God is there with you and has been there all along in the other person -- and in you. It seems that God enjoys spending time with all of us.

Then, take a little bigger step. Begin to pay attention to what catches your attention or to a problem in the world you'd like to change. Maybe there is something you'd like to give more time to doing. Find it and start to do it, at least start to do a small piece of it. And be sure to share what you're doing with those other people you're talking to, and let your experiences be some you think about it when you visit with yourself.

Think how joyful your life will be to be growing as a person, to be growing in relationship with others and not to be using so much energy projecting the image you want them to see. How joy to be loving yourself and acting with love toward others! When you're acting as a result of the growth that's happening in you, when you're doing all this not to please God, but to express how much God loves you and how much you love living, you'll be reborn. And as you bring your newly reborn self to church—to this gathering at Crossroads--we begin to recognize that rebirth in us as a body. And as we bring our reborn life as a congregation into the marketplace of Kansas City, with our ministries and our presence, We will be stepping up to full partnership with God. We'll be transforming this world, creating the new heaven and earth. And it always, always begins now – and begins here – with us.