

Promise And Paradise

Year C

Season of Pentecost

Sunday Between November 13 and November 19 Inclusive

November 14, 2010, 25th Sunday After Pentecost

Read the Bible passage: [Isaiah 65:17-25](#), The Message; or [Isaiah 65:17-25](#), The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

Read the Bible passage: [Luke 21:5-19](#), The Message; or [Luke 21:5-19](#), The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

Faith-provoking, historical insights into the lesson by [David Ewart](#), [Luke 21:5-19](#).

Click here: [George Hermanson's sermon](#), for an easy to print or email Adobe PDF version of this sermon.

The Rev. Dr. George Hermanson

Note: This sermon was preached November 18, 2007 at Edwards (Knox) United Church.

When times are out joint and the world seems to be in danger, we have turned to two images to explain the world. Those explanations have informed us, shaped us, and created the underlying assumptions we have about reality. We find these images in art and music. We find them in political philosophies. In the crisis of the environment they have emerged again. The images are of destruction or renewal. They are pessimistic or optimistic. They are fatalistic or we can overcome.

These images of destruction and healing, danger and joy, promise and fulfillment, promise of paradise within our experience and a hopelessness about changing our world are mostly unconscious. Yet they form our actions and our beliefs about what it means to flourish as humans.

We read our experiences out of what we believe is true about reality. The same event can look different to each of us because of what we believe. In a shared belief system we can have a shared experience. Belief is the lens we see reality through.

Our passages speak to a world in which destruction was an everyday experience. The writers offer images to a people under threat, where being a person of faith was dangerous. They are written when the power of Empire had brought both oppression and possibility. Familiar grounds and images had disappeared. There was as cry of "Where is God?" Promises had appeared to be broken.

In such situations the poets have offered images of promise and paradise, solutions for our sense of angst. Those images can give us hope or they can be misused for destruction. Many of those who take Christianity to task have pointed to negativity of what is called an apocalyptic vision. This is the vision where things are so

bad destruction or violence is needed to cleanse the world of evil. It leads to fundamentalism of the violent actions of martyrs for God to the secular fundamentalism of violent revolution.

In times of testing we need visions that are realistic and offer us away to live with the winds of change and the shifting ground. We need a heart of faith, a sense of faith that will connect us with a sense of ourselves; that will anchor us in the reality of our time without flinching in the face of suffering.

Both Luke and Isaiah can offer us the metaphors that will ground our hearts in vision of a promise that creates our flourishing. Yet in times of testing they also can be misread as false hope.

The apocalyptic framework of the Lucan passage can easily be enlisted in the cause of an other-worldly theology that blind us to the sufferings of life in this world. The hyperbolic promises of the passage from Isaiah can not only feed unrealistic expectations for this life (a world without sorrow, v. 19) but also foster a reduction of hope to materialistic terms (long life, material wealth, and political security, vv. 20-23).

Yet within the texts are the warnings against false prophets, those who read the times out of images of violence and redemptive violence. Those who would play on our fears and cry out it is all hopeless and meaningless. Or the false prophets of a rosy future and a trust that with a little more effort it will be O.K. and don't worry.

Embedded in the vision of both Luke and Isaiah is one of trust in God that creates hearts that care for this world. To believe in God is to believe in a power that actively sides with the good and seeks to protect those who oppose evil. Even given this they remind us that experience teaches us rather clearly that in many cases those who stand for what is right suffer extreme consequences and even death.

In the reading of the signs of the time it is crucial what belief system we use to interpret reality. The alternative to the seductive detours posed by apocalyptic thinking is the clear witness of God. In this world, this earth, we experience reality. Paradise is not a waiting for some future reality, some after death reward, but the active presence of God's love in every day events, in our time and space, in our now.

These visions of paradise now, the promise of the presence of God does not sugar coat reality, is not a diversion from a writhing world but to see the persuasive power of God in our care of one another and the world.

God offers us protection that must come within the confines of divine power that is persuasive rather than coercive. This is not necessarily to reduce the promise of protection to a spiritual dimension utterly disconnected from material reality.

Luke reminds his listeners that those who follow Jesus are by no means immune to tragedy, and can still experience the assurance that God is present with us in our struggles to bring forth a better world. Even when we fail to achieve what we hoped for, God is still with us, healing us. And we also know that God is by no means resigned to those failures. For it is an essential aspect of God's nature not only to imagine a better future but also to provide the relevant lures within the world of human experience to bring such a future

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May the Lure be with you

about. By reading the signs of our time out of faith, we can see those hints of love breaking forth through the cracks in the cosmos so we can dance through iron doors, singing our way through blind walls, having hilarity's against all reason.

In Vancouver I had these experiences. Taking our Grandchildren to their skating lessons we saw the tentativeness turn to confidence in the practice of falling and getting up again. The promise of paradise lived out in joy of skating.

Then, at the conference, Jay McDaniel offered this image of a geography of wonder. How wonder can shape us for the healing of this bruised earth. He was driving through the dark night of Arkansas, his son eight. They looked up at all the vastness of the sky and millions of stars shining bright. There was silence, so Jay asked, "What are feeling?" His son responded, "I feel small but included."

Then I visited my friend with ALS and our conversations raged on. And is the point. Suzanne wondered how we experienced the winds and storms there in Victoria, images of destruction on the weather network. And I said what storm? Our communion of talk and friendship had kept the storms from our experience. We spoke of paradise experienced here. We spoke of the promise of love experienced now. We drank deep from the sense of God in that room, in us, and in our shared networks - we had shelter from the storm.

Promise and Paradise not as some final static state but as a moment now, forming us to be present to the needs of our world. Promise and paradise as metaphors for the renewal of our societies on the historical plane, even as we must also affirm that God assures us of a fulfillment in that transcends that plane. Isaiah's poetic vision reminds us of the ideals for which we hope can form our heart. Those poetic images reminds this is what God strives. The "new heavens" and "new earth" the prophet foresees signify the possibilities for human society when we open ourselves to God's transforming power.

Paradise and Promise gives us confidence in the value of life in this world as the place of salvation. This life-affirming faith can enabled us to resist the many forces of sin and death in the world. We can be those who live in the storms of our time as voice of calm vision of hope. We can be those who bring healing and vision to issues of our reality because we have tasted the promise of love. Having tasted we move on with confidence, joining with others who seek the healing of our world.

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