

“Now and Not Now”

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

It was the spring of 1963 in Birmingham, and it looked as if the civil rights movement would suffer yet another defeat. The powers that be had more jail space than the civil rights workers had people. But then one Sunday, reports historian Taylor Branch, 2,000 young people came out of worship at the New Pilgrim Baptist Church and prepared to march. The police were shocked. How much longer was this going to go on? How many more people were they going to have to arrest? The line of young people was five blocks long. As the marchers approached the line of police officers and dogs, the notorious Bull Connor walked out to confront them, shouting for the firemen to turn on the hoses.

The line of young people came close—face-to-face with Connor and the firemen and police. Then they knelt and prayed. The Rev. Charles Billups stood and shouted, *“Turn on your water! Turn loose your dogs! We will stand here 'til we die!”* After a few moments, Billups and the young people walked forward, and the firemen parted for them to pass. Onlookers said it was as if the Red Sea had parted for the children of Israel.

Ask yourself: What kind of church does it take to nurture Christians capable of standing like that? What does it take to live out the new creation and endure the struggles, the disappointments and the hostility that Christians and churches face when they do so?

Let’s consider these questions in light of today’s readings. Both Isaiah and Jesus in Luke are telling us about what God's way looks like. Isaiah tells of the new heavens and new earth that God will bring to pass; people will have a place of their own and will be able to do good work, and the “wolf and the lamb shall feed together.” On the other hand, Jesus says that those who seek to embody and live into God's vision and God's way are going to face tough times, turmoil, persecution, even arrest and death, and will have to learn to endure these things. The kids and churches in Birmingham knew something about living toward Isaiah's vision and the endurance that Jesus talks about.

Commenting on this reality, theologian John Howard Yoder said the church needs *“a minority perspective.”* A *majority perspective* assumes that by power,

wealth, organizing or hard work we can get things to turn out the way we want, but a minority perspective never makes those assumptions. A minority church perspective seeks to embody and be witness to the way of Jesus, but without embracing worldly power or wealth or influence. A minority church uses imagination and learns to survive over the long haul.

Yoder said, "*In Christendom, both optimism and despair are correlated with the direct reading of how it is going for us in the rising and falling of power structures.*" *But the minority community learns to hope even when things seem to be going badly—"not only because we have heard promises 'from beyond the system,' but also because we have learned that sometimes our pessimistic readings of the present are shadowed too much by taking some setback too seriously."*

In other words, we're in this *kingdom business* for the long haul. Our hope is animated with Isaiah's vision of justice and peace and rooted in the tough reality of Jesus' call to endure.¹

Theologian Ulrich Mauser has said that Christian life is placed between history and eternity. It takes part, on the one hand, in the history of the world within which it exercises its faith; and it participates, on the other hand, in the power of the resurrection as the token of the new world toward which it is straining. All of this--history and eschatology alike--is bound up in the new creation echoed in Isaiah, as well as Jesus' call to endure.²

This reminds me of Edward Hicks's depiction of Isaiah's vision in his painting *The Peaceable Kingdom*. A Quaker minister and artist, Hicks painted animals and children throughout his life. He also mixed in images of Quakers and Native Americans meeting together peacefully. But after the great American Quaker schism of 1827, Hicks's images were crowded with less peace and included more menacing fangs. Now he was beginning to paint reality, right?

One way of interpreting this text is to recognize the precarious powers (and potential for peace) that we all carry. Tending to our *inner warfare*—to the power-hungry lions within us that tear into our insecure inner lambs—is hard

¹ Kyle Childress, *Living By the Word*, The Christian Century, November 4th, 2010

² Scott D. Anderson, *Living By the Word*, The Christian Century, November 11th, 2016

work, but in this way we join God in imagining our worlds, both inner and outer, both present and future, into hopeful reconciliation.

Pulling back the lens on this text, we face the larger question of God promising a reconciliation of all creatures. Questions immediately arise. *When* will God's new kingdom come, we ask? Just check the news, we add—justice is not yet reigning. The people of God have already been waiting a long time, so is this prophecy an airy-fairy spiritual fantasy? Or if indeed God has a utopia in the works, why are we bothering to sweat and fret about anything?

But the testimony of scripture—in both Testaments—is that *God's new creation is happening both now and in the future.*

Albert Einstein talked about the fluidity of “now” and “then.” *“The only reason for time is so that everything doesn't happen at once.”* If our God is unlimited by time, then perhaps this isn't just an intellectual somersault. Perhaps it matters very much that God's promise is both now and not now, already and not yet.

If it is true that each writer has only one or two books in him/her and that each preacher has only one or two sermons, then perhaps mine today is *“both now and not now”*: the Christian task of bearing *paradox*. God is in us and not in us. Three and one. Human and divine. Holding opposite truths in tension with one another, rather than accepting one and rejecting the other, is one of the highest spiritual disciplines we ever face.

The paradox in God's lofty promise in Isaiah is that all *will* be resolved, and that all *is* resolved. The good news is that this frees us: we are not prisoners of our circumstances. The world is and shall be bigger than all the limitations we encounter in ourselves, in others and in the material universe of gravity, violence, aging, suffering and injustice.

Interestingly, there is only one command from God in this passage. *“But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating.”* This passage echoes the Westminster Creed, which declares the chief end of humanity is *“to glorify God and to enjoy [God] forever.”* When I studied these words in Seminary, I remember a classmate objected. *“Wait,”* she said, *“the chief end is to follow the commandments and the Golden Rule, to be like Jesus!”* Our professor smiled and waited for us to get it. *“Oooh,”* we realized, *“all those things are glorifying God.”*

You see, because we cannot control the future, we fear it. We want to predict, control, explain and order it. *What will happen to the addict daughter, the default mortgage, the shaky career, the Middle East, the Earth's climate and all of the most vulnerable bits of God's creation?* Living in the moment is a continual spiritual struggle. We spend too much time fretting about something in the past or scrambling to plan (control) the future. I sometimes recall a favorite 12-step acronym in these moments: *"F.E.A.R. is Forgetting Everything's All Right."*

Better yet, we can turn to Isaiah's words and be reminded that we are not God, and that God is bringing about more grace and goodness than we can imagine. In seeking nevertheless to imagine and to insist on God's intention for a just world, we participate in it, which may be the best news of all.³

You know, like many American Christians, I long for this eschatological image of peace to take root in our *politics*. The public square has always been a marketplace of clashing ideas, the arena of competing value systems and the policy prescriptions that grow out of them. But the intense polarization of our era has turned the political marketplace into a toxic battleground, where political leaders who express differing worldviews are transformed into enemies.

Which is why Jesus' call to *endurance* is so important. You see, Jesus' advice is not simple. It is not a checklist or a road map to help us navigate the days to come. It gives license ***neither*** for blind optimism nor for doomsday preparations. But it does contain a promise: *the faithful [like those college aged Civil Rights activists in 1963] will be called to witness, and when they are, God will be present and at work.*

In the midst of every kind of trouble, they (we) will be called to witness because they will see what God is building, even then.⁴

³ Katie Givens Kime, *Living By the Word*, The Christian Century, November 5th, 2013

⁴ Yvette Schock, *Living By the Word*, The Christian Century, October 24th, 2019