

The Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost  
Isaiah 65:17-25, Canticle 9, Luke 21:15-19  
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“I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; ...no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress .... The wolf and the lamb shall feed together.... They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.”

“As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.... Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famine and plagues.... You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers... and they will put some of you to death.”

What a stark contrast between what we heard from the prophet Isaiah and from Jesus in the gospel of Luke. All will be well and bliss in the first instance, and all will be wrong and amiss in the latter. What a difference 500 years makes in Israel and, more specifically, Jerusalem.

The context for Isaiah 65 is that time shortly after the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem by the Babylonian armies. Now the Jews are returning from their 70 years of exile in Babylon to find their beloved capital in ruins. Through the prophet, God is giving them a big and glorious vision of a restored Temple, as well as replenished homes, farms, families and a renewed communal life without disease, premature death, infant mortality or civil unrest. For a couple of generations of people who have known only loss and hardship, their Lord is showing them a type of Eden in hopes they can imagine and work toward a new and better future, a new earth.

During Jesus’ lifetime, the Temple was more magnificent than ever before because King Herod had committed to a beautification project that would last for 46 years, well after he himself would die. The only Jewish historian of the time, Josephus, wrote that the entire face of the Temple was covered with gold. When the sun shined on it, one couldn’t bear to look, and it could be seen miles away sitting atop the highest point in the region – Mt. Zion. While not especially large by our standards, in that day, one would have had to go to Rome or Egypt to see a comparable structure. It was a fitting house of God. Jesus predicted that its collapse was imminent and, furthermore, natural disasters, world wars, satellites falling out of the sky, family betrayals, arrests and some executions among his followers were also to be expected.

Luke wrote his gospel after the fall of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD, and his second edition, the Acts of the Apostles, tells of the fate of some of the disciples. Christians were persecuted and, in some instances, killed for nearly 300 years after the Jesus movement began. Even today we hear of churches being damaged and Christians being attacked in other countries around the world, mostly in parts of Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

Lucy Dorr, a devout Baptist and member of our Thursday morning Bible study, brought us copies of a publication called “Voice of the Martyrs.” Inside are stories of Christians around the world

standing strong in their faith in spite of persecution. There was also a map identifying nearly 60 countries in which the practice of Christianity is restricted or where Christianity may be legal but people are openly hostile to Christians.

In the first place, we should be ever so grateful that our Constitution protects our choice of practicing our religion or not. And secondly, if that were to change, would we still vigorously practice our faith even in the face of hostility? I suspect we hope we would, but we may never know.

One of the great early church martyrs was a man named Polycarp. After being arrested for being a Christian, a Roman authority demanded that he deny his faith in Jesus or be burned at the stake. Polycarp famously replied, "86 years I have served him, and he has done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my King who has saved me?" These words and his example have inspired thousands, perhaps millions, to keep the faith.

In the opening sentences of our burial service, we say, "Whether we live or whether we die we are the Lord's." Isn't this what Jesus means when he tells his followers that some will be put to death, but not a hair of your head will perish. We may be lost on the earthly side of life, but we will never be lost to God, not even a single strand of our hair.

Should we worry about possible persecution or martyrdom? Jesus makes it pretty clear we are not to. Even to those in his day who seriously faced this threat, he says, "...do not be terrified." At a clergy conference I attended last week, the speaker said that "do not be afraid" is cited in some form or another 365 times in the New Testament. That is once for every day of the year.

We are to be about the business, then, of being witnesses and testifying to our faith by word and example in every circumstance we find ourselves. Our work is our ministry and our coworkers are the harvest field. We must show them Jesus and, hopefully, make them want to want him. We need to stand apart – be different. Every day and at every moment we are to engage the world with love. "By *our* endurance *we* will save *our* souls."

As I was doing my quiet morning prayer the other day, my mind wandered off as it is prone to do. I started thinking excitedly about Friday, my upcoming day off. I planned to drive to the mountains and fly fish in a lovely meandering river, something I hadn't done for quite awhile. I was counting the days when another voice interrupted mine and said, "Stop counting the days and, instead, make every day count."

I knew where that voice came from, and I'm trying to make every day count for God and God's purposes – realizing that big vision from Isaiah, where there is no more weeping or cries of distress. Shouldn't we all be doing the same? God is counting on us. AMEN.

