

“Settling for Too Little”
Isaiah 65:17-25
November 14, 2010
Commitment Sunday
Rev. Peter Shidemantle

One of the strategies you hear about that world class athletes employ before a race or a competition is to visualize themselves doing the absolute best of which they are capable, having a flawless performance – getting everything going in the right direction – with the result that they hopefully will win the race. It is the same for musicians and other artists. The idea is not just to get through the piece without making any mistakes, but to perform or to create what the artist “hears” or “sees” before it is accomplished. The end or the goal is somehow always in view, which provides the motivation and the passion to want to achieve it, and which drives the training and the practice.

I think Isaiah’s vision of a new heaven and a new earth is supposed to play a similar kind of role for people of faith, and for the church of Jesus Christ. In this case, it is not what we create or accomplish, but God – who declares in Isaiah’s proclamation, “. . . I am about to create new heavens and a new earth.” The vision that Isaiah puts before us is a vision of this life, life in this world. We know this because the elements of the vision have to do with this-worldly concerns: children dying in infancy; people not living out their years; the security of housing and meaningful and productive work; for women to bring children into the world that doesn’t present them with the sudden terrors of war or famine; an intimacy with God through the course of life; and a world truly at peace.

In places where there is economic upheaval, or perennial conflict, or where a disaster of one kind or another has occurred, people in the middle of it will often say, “We just want to live in peace;” or “We want to be able to live a productive life;” or “We want to be able to provide for our children.” These were the concerns of the Israelites to whom Isaiah initially

addressed his words. Having returned from exile in Babylon some decades before, they tried to rebuild their beloved and devastated city of Jerusalem. But yet, still much of the city and the land were in ruin. We can imagine Isaiah walking through the rubble. (The evening news from Afghanistan, Baghdad or Haiti provides vivid images to help our imaginations.) Homes and markets destroyed or empty, people still suffering from the effects of oppression and dislocation. Hunger, thirst, illness and early death, sorrow and grief, economic injustice and political turmoil were the realities of the day. Amidst all this breakdown the people have for the most part turned their backs on God and have followed their own way. They are divided and cynical about their prospects. They are pursuing new venues of comfort and help.

It sounds vaguely familiar, doesn't it – especially that part about people being divided and cynical about their prospects. In both society and in many parts of the church it is our divisions that get the most attention. Visions of unity and peace, of sacrifice for common cause, seem empty and naïve. We seem to be locked in a cycle of anger and blame, and perpetual war.

Having gone their own way, the people of Israel found the prophet's vision difficult to embrace. Their hearts weren't directed toward God. It's hard to know which comes first – losing the vision, or turning your back on God. But the effect is the same. *Belief in God is empty unless we are somehow captured by the vision of what God is doing in the world, and what God would do, in us.* God's intention is to create new heavens and a new earth, and that we would be glad and rejoice forever in it. It looks like this: no more weeping or distress, no more infants who live but a few days, or an old person who falls short of a hundred. Death is present, but it does not ruin life. All will know the dignity of self-reliance in a community of respect and toleration, and basic needs will be assured, as will the blessings of generations to come. God will be so close to us that before we call to him he will answer. All of nature shall bend away from prey devouring prey to sharing in the bounty of a generous God.

We don't know how God will accomplish what God intends, how God means to transform the universe, but we can confess that we know it is in God's power to do so. It is easy to be cynical about this, dismiss it as some kind of theological pipe dream – unless we know something about the power of God to transform us. I am reminded of that candidate for the ministry down south somewhere who went before his presbytery for examination. Some were there who were not impressed with the candidate's theology, especially his understanding of salvation through Jesus Christ. In response to a hostile question about who could be saved, the young man replied, "Well, I guess if Jesus could save someone like me, he could save just about anybody." What is possible for God? That's purely an "academic" question unless you're in on what God is already doing. Not that some have insider information that others don't have. There's no "inside" or "outside" when it comes to God's desire, God's intentions.

Some would have us believe that in order for God to bring the "new heavens and a new earth," God will have to utterly destroy the present world and create a new one. You can't back that up with Isaiah's vision. It is not about that, but about building on the original creation that the Creator called good – about transforming that creation into something new. And what strikes me so clearly about this vision is that it is both God's intention for the world, and the fondest dream of the human heart. But do we let that dream rise to the level of hope, and if so, do we allow that hope to fill our lives with purpose and intention to partner with God in the new creation? If not, our faith is merely about going through the motions, like an athlete who is content simply not to lose, or a musician just trying to get through the piece without making mistakes. There is no passion in it. Do we "visualize" the "new heavens and new earth?"

Given the human track record, it's hard to imagine. Looking at history alone gives little hope. But it is not about history; it is about God. As Christians we believe that God has

entered human history, entered human life most fully in Jesus Christ. He is the lens through whom we get the clearest view of God's intentions for us. No one is outside the reach of God's compassionate, redeeming love (If he can save me, he can save anybody.) His life, his death and resurrection clarify the vision – not as a goal to be looked for off in the distance, but one to be realized here and now. How do we understand the mystery of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ? The early church got itself all tied up in knots over this. Though we cannot enter the mind of God, we can clearly see the vision as Christ lived it. We can see his welcoming of sinners, his lifting up of the lowly and the faint of heart, his model of claiming power through nonviolent action, his challenge to the piety of the self-righteous, his life as the conduit of God's healing power.

We may not know how God means to transform the universe, but, as Mary Eleanor Johns puts it, “We are able to give one drink of cold water at a time. We are able to bring comfort to the poor and the wretched, one act of mercy or change at a time. One book given, one friendship claimed, one covenant of love, one can of beans, one moment of commendation, one confession of God's presence but for the asking, one moment in which another person is humanized rather than objectified, one challenge to the set order that maintains injustice, one declaration of the evil that is hiding in plain sight, one declaration that every person is a child of God: these acts accumulate within God's grace.” (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4*)

There needs to be a revival of passion in the church. The Bible thinks very large about these things – but we tend to settle for too little. Do we realize what we are part of? Nothing less than the renewal and mending of the world. If we truly claim that vision it will claim us. We will seek to live more generously, more lovingly, more compassionately – more faithfully, as our eyes lift up to meet the gaze of God.