

“Imagine a New World”  
November 13, 2022  
Scripture: Isaiah 65:17-25

What sort of a world do you want to live in? When the prophet Isaiah asks that question, the answer comes from God’s own mouth: “I am about to create new heavens and a new earth.” So, maybe the question shouldn’t be about the world we want to live in, but what sort of world does God want to create. According to Isaiah God’s imagination is much broader and more lavish than ours.

God imagines a world where people live in harmony with their environment and each other. A world where fear and despair are eradicated because everyone has access to what they need to be healthy; everyone is born into plenty; everyone lives into old age with dignity; and the sounds of weeping and distress are silenced. Beyond health and longevity, it’s a world where homelessness is abolished; no more absentee landlords, everyone owns their home and is secure. Land is used for the well-being of those who work it and not for exporting crops to others. Working for themselves and not for others goes to the very foundation of Israel’s history. They were slaves in Egypt, all their work belonged to the Pharaoh; in the new world God imagines, they are slaves to no one.

It is a magical world where wolves and sheep, lions and oxen all feed together and not on each other. There is no more fear of predators, no more cowering as prey. Now that certainly sounds like fantasy, even though there are examples of natural predators living serenely with animals that would normally be their prey. That only happens under very unusual circumstances. So, this vision does veer into fantasy in the end. But does that invalidate the whole picture? Our tendency has been to assume, because of this strange image at the end, that this is all meant to point to some spiritual reality, some existence in the hereafter and not to anything possible in the world of here and now.

Yet Isaiah is speaking to people whose present reality is a struggle. They’re trying to rebuild their society after several decades of neglect. What sort of world do they want to create? What does order look like for them? Their inclination was to build a wall around the city and purify the population by driving all the non-Israelite people out. It was to impose a strict religious code on the people and bring their behavior into conformity. Isaiah pushes back on that. This vision doesn’t concern itself with religious piety. The new Jerusalem isn’t distinctive because all its people say the right prayers or believe the right things. It’s special because its people live in security. I think Isaiah is offering a vision that’s achievable if the leadership of Israel is willing to pursue it.

And that’s really the rub, isn’t it? We can talk all we want about everyone having enough and homelessness being eradicated and children and old people having proper healthcare but until we’re willing to pursue those things and do what’s needed to make them a reality, then it all sounds like fantasy. It’s no more real than sheep and wolves living together in harmony. Our problem with this kind of vision of society is we don’t take it seriously; we treat it like a fairytale instead of a call to arms.

What God is saying to Israel through Isaiah is, “Imagine a new world.” Over the years the book of Isaiah has come to be identified by scholars as “the fifth gospel.” Early Christians saw in Isaiah many of the themes they believed described Jesus’ life. Not only do we find the foretelling of a child to be born who will be called Prince of Peace and descriptions of a servant who suffers for the sake of the people, but we also find visions like this, visions that describe a world characterized by justice and compassion. In Luke’s gospel when Jesus stands to read the scroll in his home synagogue, he doesn’t turn to the suffering servant passages or the birth prophecies; he reads, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” For Luke Jesus is the embodiment of the vision of Isaiah, the embodiment of justice and compassion Isaiah describes. And if we are meant to be the embodiment of Jesus in the world, then this vision is meant to be ours.

Imagine a new world. Imagine a world where everyone has access to affordable housing. Imagine a world where people are able to work with dignity and earn a living wage. Imagine a world where access to healthcare is available to everyone and no one has to choose between visiting a doctor and paying their rent. Imagine a world where 70% of wealth is no longer held by just 10% of the population. God is inviting us to become partners in imagining a new world.

It’s no accident, I think, that Isaiah presents this vision during a time when life in Israel is uncertain. This vision comes when it does because Isaiah is convinced that God believes in God’s people. He’s convinced that God is confident in our capacity to bring God’s vision to life. Without us, without our willingness to advocate for God’s vision, it all remains a fantasy. And more than that, Isaiah’s words assure us we are not alone in our efforts. God is near us, answering before we call, hearing us as we speak, so we have nothing to fear. Imagine a new world and let God’s vision be ours.

Amen