

What Do I Say?
Bob Stillerman
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
Isaiah 65:17-25
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This past Wednesday morning, I, along with millions of other people, logged into Facebook to check the pulse of post-election America. It wasn't all that much different from every election year, or even from every Monday morning after a football game.

Some were ecstatic. Some not so much. That's what happens when decisions involve winners and losers – some people win and some people lose. And an entire nation is reminded once more of the people they forgot to unfollow after their last disappointment in an election, or a Super Bowl.

Broncos fans! Libertarians! Not on my page, mister! Unfollow. Unfriend. Problem solved.

Such is the nature of our time.

But if anything, Facebook can help a preacher with his sermon. And such was the case on Wednesday.

I was struck by the common responses of the two sides.

Several euphoric Trump supporters noted: "It's like Christmas, only better." To be sure, millions of Democrats echoed similar sentiments eight years ago with the election of Barack Obama. And to be sure, whoever wins in 2018 and 2020 will repeat the pattern.

On the other hand, many despondent Clinton supporters asked: "What do I tell my children?" And to be sure, that same sentiment was echoed in 2008, and once more in 2012, when Republicans lost the White House.

Perhaps all these feelings are normal. After all, eight years is a long time to experience euphoria or disillusionment, and then all of a sudden, it can turn on a dime. And we live in a system that pits these two extremes against one another. We live in a system that says winning is righteous and losing is not; winning is validation, and losing is not; winners are beyond reproach, and losers are not.

And I wondered, "How can my feeble mind respond to these two extremes in a way that is productive and good?" And to be honest, I'm not sure that I can. And so I turned to this morning's lection.

The prophet of Third Isaiah had a vision. God proclaimed:

I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;
The former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating;
For I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.

This is remarkable. Truly remarkable. Given the setting of this text, God's words are beyond audacious. The people of Israel have returned home after fifty years in exile. And the picture isn't pretty. The Holy City they heard their grandparents describe is no more. It isn't even a remnant of what they heard

described. Picture the most abandoned, dilapidated place you can imagine: A closed steel mill where tumbleweeds poke through cracked asphalt; places like Hiroshima or Chernobyl where radio-active isotopes have made entire neighborhoods lifeless and empty for generations to come; Aleppo, a city of millions reduced to rubble, and mired in chaos and war.

The Jerusalem the returning exiles inherited was no gift. And the leaders placed in charge of restoring it were both corrupt and incompetent. No doubt, the ones who laid down their harps by the Rivers of Babylon must have wondered what possessed them to journey back home. They thought they'd known weeping before.

But lucky for us, God is audacious. And God is just bigger than we can ever imagine. And in the midst of hopelessness, Isaiah's God proclaims: "Don't worry, I'm doing something new." Martha Sterne phrases it this way:

Isaiah tells us that God has the capacity to create. We all know that; however Isaiah reminds us that God creates on an unimaginable scale – new heavens and a new earth. In other words, there is nothing in all of creation, or in all that we imagine beyond creation, that is beyond the capacity of God to change.

She continues:

For people mired in regret or loss or sin, and for people ground down by oppression and pain of living in bondage, what a message!!! Nothing is final; everything is up for grabs in the mystery of the creative capacity of God.

But don't misunderstand this prophecy. God did not and God will not wave a magic wand that creates some Utopia for us to enjoy in the not-too-distant future. Instead, God invites us into that future right here and right now. God tells each of us:

You have gifts. You have value. You have the power to make God's world God's world once more. One day, humanity will no longer suffer under the dominion of imperfect kings and princes, but rather, all people will choose to dwell under the dominion of a loving and grace-filled God.

Here's the thing. Those returning exiles (and us as well!) had and have a limited imagination when it comes to new heavens and a new earth. They (and we) just assume this new heaven and new earth is a place where losers are turned into winners and winners are turned into losers. It's not new, it's just a reversal of fortune.

But God has quite the imagination. God says this New Jerusalem will not be about haves and have-nots. It's a place where there is enough. It's a place where both the powerful AND the vulnerable, the young AND the old, will live in harmony. And it's a place where farms and vineyards and homes and happy children will once more be plentiful.

And as I hear God's word in this passage, I hear very loudly, "Put your hope and your trust and your faith in me, not Caesar."

Friends, elections will come and go. And there will be outcomes that makes us happy, and outcomes that make us irate. That's the nature of imperfect systems.

But God is not imperfect. And God is not absent. And God is not subject to term limits. God is here. With us. Right now. And even in our midst, God's imagination is at work on a new infrastructure plan that far exceeds the bounds of any campaign promise. New heavens and a new earth. You'll see!!!

So back to those facebook comments.

Yes, today is like Christmas morning, and even better, but not like in our modern context. Christmas is not intended to be a celebration that lauds the acquisition of shiny new things, or relishes in new privileges acquired at the expense of others. It's something else. And it's something far more valuable. Whether we live in ancient Palestine, or in the Europe of the Middle Ages, or in America in 2016, we live in the midst of government authority, and in the midst of those who cling to the powers of this world. And each and every day, new children are born into this world. And just like on the first Christmas morning, these children awake with a joy and an innocence in their eyes. And when they cry out, the arms of loving mothers embrace them. And when these babies smile and coo and laugh, and even cry, they reveal God's love in its most authentic and vulnerable and purest form. They do not know, nor can they perceive things like domination, or marginalization, or hate, or anger, or greed, or power, or all the things that turn us from the love of God. And on Christmas morning, we remember the child, who even as an adult, prioritized the authentic love of God over the powers of this world. We remember the One who refused to participate in a system of winners and losers, but instead proclaimed a kingdom where all are designated children of God. And so yes, today is like Christmas, because we still believe that every child can live into God's goodness, and like the Christ, free themselves from dependence on imperfect systems. We would do well to remember Christmas every election cycle!

And what should you tell your children? I'll tell you what I'll say to my young daughter. No election, however big you may think it feels, determines your worth and value. You are a child of God. And when God says, "See I am creating new heavens and a new earth," that promise includes you. God's justice is not limited to a constitution, God's goodness is not limited to one political party, God's possibilities are not limited to one nation, and God's grace is not as small as our limited lenses of righteousness.

And, I'll tell her about each of you. By my count, this congregation has known six presidents. Six very different men with six very different agendas. And regardless of party, our congregation has offered a healthy dose of both prayerful support and dissent for our elected leaders. We have prayed that they learn patience, that they lead justly, and that they find the strength to make difficult decisions. And we have also taken seriously our prophetic duty: we have voiced our dissent as Christians for policies that promote conflict over peace, harm vulnerable citizens, or ignore our call to protect creation. That tradition will continue with our next President.

And like the saints before us, we will not limit the bounds of God's goodness to the capacities of our local systems and governments. New heavens and a new earth do not begin with systems, do not begin with politicians, and they are certainly not contingent on elections. New heavens and a new earth begin with God's love. Look to that love, grasp it, and share it with others. For it is only in the sharing of God's love with one another that the wolf will finally lay down with the lamb and none shall hurt or destroy on God's Holy Mountain.

May it be so and may it be soon. Amen.