

Isaiah 65:17-25

“It is the Best of Times”

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times”. This is the first line of the famous historical novel by Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities. Even if you were not required to read this book in school, most of us have heard this famous quote. But how many of us remember the rest of the paragraph? I did not. It reads like this.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.

Reflecting on Dickens’ words, I saw a distinct parallel not only to the words of Isaiah, but to our own society and world today. You see, Isaiah, like the prophets before and after him, was charged with delivering a message of judgment and a message of hope. In reality, words of both the best of times and the worst of times!

Many people do not like to read, study or hear about the prophets but when I discovered them in Old Testament during Seminary, I became completely enthralled. Not only for their ability to tell us things about Jesus Christ hundreds of years before he lived, but because they spell out very plainly three facts that help me survive the joys and trials of every-day life.

Fact number one: God loves us no matter what. God loves us enough to have created us in God’s own image and to send His son to die for each person here. Fact number two: Like any loving parent, God punishes us when we misbehave. When we defy the guidelines of our parent, knowingly or unknowingly, we must pay the price. Fact number three: God will never turn his

back on us, even as we sin. God is always waiting with open arms for us to return to a life lived within God's will. God has offered and always will offer hope in the midst of destruction, and order in the midst of chaos.

Now I can hear you thinking – “Well, that's three points. Give us a poem and we'll go to lunch.” But there is so much more to the beauty and mystery of this passage. These words remind us that the best of times and the worst of times always have and always will coexist until God comes again and God's kingdom dwells among and within us! So let's see how the season of light and the season of darkness have always prevailed in creation and what hope God offers us in these words.

Isaiah's visions were first presented to the children of God who had returned to Jerusalem after 70 years of Exile in Babylon. Many of them only knew of Jerusalem from the memories of their parents. And those who *actually* remembered Jerusalem had most likely tried to cling to her glory days.

But when they returned, they found a destroyed land and a destroyed Temple. They were free, yet nothing had been repaired or made right. Death and destruction were all that the eyes could see. Crumbled buildings, overgrown vegetation. Was THIS the promise that God had waiting for them. And what does it mean to us?

Well let me share a brief moment of our vacation to offer a modern day parallel. We saw some of the most beautiful sights in God's creation while we were in New Mexico. Even though much of the area was brown desert, when we stopped and took time to look, we saw centuries of creation in the different shades of the high rocks. We saw plants able to survive and even bloom with little or no water and herds of wild horses galloping over the landscape with the pride of warrior stallions carrying kings. Yet, they were only searching for water and food in the desert.

One afternoon we took a jeep ride with a guide whose knowledge of the history and archaeology of the land made the beauty of God's world all the more fascinating. How could we find a shark's tooth and fossils of shells in the desert? Because 63 million years ago, it was under water. We saw remnants of living from the 1500's including children's toys, pottery and knives. And as we enjoyed the beauty, I found myself wondering, "How could anyone **not** believe in God when they walk through this fascinating land."

Yet, more often than not during our trip there, we saw extreme poverty, homeless people on every corner, people living in dilapidated campers and trucks. At the home of Georgia O'Keefe, the famous artist, we were told that the nearby village has water rights every Monday from 9-11. That means that people living right here in our country can fill up their water jugs once a week. Public rest stops post signs about fines for filling water jugs from the sinks and fountains there.

And when I saw the conditions that my fellow Americans must accept as the norm, I found myself wondering, "How do these people believe in God?" In truth, our current world is not so different from the world of the people of the 5th Century BC. We saw the best of times and the worst of times, all in one day.

But that is just ONE small corner of the world. So, let's think about autumn. Fall is my favorite time of year because I love the autumn colors, the cooler weather and football. But honestly, once the leaves fall, we are left with desolate looking branches, lawns that are carpeted in wet leaves and often gray skies with only the promise of winter to follow. Looking out of the windows in November can be somewhat like looking at crumbled buildings and overgrown vegetation. And football season does not last forever! A little like the contrasts that the Israelites faced. The beauty of freedom and the reality that awaited them.

Of course, we can carry this parallel into a world scenario if we dare. Here is some “spring of hope and winter of despair” that has been in our news this year. In May, billionaire Robert F. Smith announced during his commencement speech at Moorehouse College that he would pay off every Morehouse student's debt. This year saw the most diverse class of lawmakers in history sworn into the 116th Congress. And while the rest of us mere mortals rely heavily on spell check, eight impressive kids at the Scripps National Spelling Bee crushed five consecutive rounds of perfect spelling. After realizing they'd soon run out of words, for the first time in 94 years, the competition's officials crowned them all co-champions.

On the flip side, Venice is underwater, there was another school shooting in Texas on Friday. The teen who shot his father and an elementary school child in Townville, SC was sentenced to life in prison Friday. And no matter what you think about our current politics, does anyone want to scream if they hear the term “quid pro quo” one more time? So you see, the conditions that Isaiah was addressing are not that foreign after all. And I have gone through these comparisons between our world and his, in hopes that everyone will see the good news that is found for all of God's people, then and now.

At first glance, we might hear Isaiah's words and think that God is planning a new version of Noah's flood. A situation that calls for complete destruction of all that is, so that God can finally build the utopia that we all want – whether we are 5th century Israelites or 21st century Americans. But a deeper look into these words reminds us that God is not just building upon a creation that God has already deemed good. Indeed, God is “RE-CREATing” something even better!

Isaiah helps us understand this by offering beautiful word pictures to fill our minds and imaginations. A world where joy and delight replace weeping and cries of distress. A world

where homes and crops are plentiful and our work will be rewarded with long life, descendants who love us and who love the Lord. A world where animals who are natural enemies of one another will sleep together in peace. What a vision!

And what hope this must have given the children of Israel as they faced what had once been the glorious home where they believed their God lived. Just as the red and gold leaves must fall from the trees and leave us facing the stark reality of winter, we too can have hope. Because we know it is only by their dying that the leaves bring new life as their mulch nourishes the earth and prepares the way for spring.

Another reassurance that Isaiah offers us is by these words: the former things will not be remembered or come to mind. Basically, Isaiah says that not only will we not remember the past but there will be no past! You see, the prophet was speaking to a people who had turned their backs on God and followed their own way. They were a people who were divided and somewhat cynical about their future. And are we any different?

Yet, this promise is that judgment is *never* God's definitive word. Knowing that God restored the Israelites to the Promised Land even after all of their sinfulness is proof that God does not regard our past when we turn back to covenant living. Yes, God forgets our sins but do WE really want to? Isn't it true that a forgotten history is doomed to repeat itself?

Well consider the newly ordained pastor who was having trouble keeping up with all of the stories of the past of her church. She found herself unable to remember the petty gossip that different people in the congregation confided to her and was often confused over which families in the congregation did not agree with the others. When she shared this with an older, more experienced pastor, he told her this was simply "Holy Amnesia".

This passage assures us all that holy amnesia is a gift from God. Personally, I have found that I MUST name the hurt before I can begin the healing. But I can only start anew when I let go of the past. When I choose NOT to dwell on the pain but look instead to the newness that forgiveness and reconciliation can bring, I am more apt to welcome the promise of God's kingdom of peace and the wholeness that are offered to me when I leave the past in the past. So, to put this in the perspective of Isaiah AND Charles Dickens, it is only when we let go of the worst of times that we can truly live into the best of times.

But the most important message in these words is found in the original Hebrew of the first line of the passage. Now many of you have heard me speak disdainfully of my Hebrew classes during Seminary. But Greek was even worse. Here's why. In Biblical Greek, there are ten verb tenses that can be spoken in four different moods and three different voices. Now, I am assuming that sounds like Greek to all of you so here's what it means in English. ONE VERB in Biblical Greek can basically have 143 different forms!

Praise God that in Hebrew there are only TWO verb tenses. Present and past. You are either doing something or you have already done it. And in this passage, God speaks in the present. He says, "I AM CREATING NEW HEAVENS AND A NEW EARTH!" God is creating now. That's right. Just as the ancient Israelites were themselves right in the middle of God's *recreation*, so are we.

You and I know this is true because we can look at the promises of Isaiah through the lenses of the incarnation – that is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus' life provides us with a new framework for nonviolent action and the ministry of presence. And his death and resurrection allow us to engage in the world as ones who do not remember this promise as our past but claim it as our future. We can do this because we know that our God

loves us so much that God turned the most violent, deadly and heartbreaking day in the history of humanity – the crucifixion of His only Son – into the day of victory for everyone here.

This means that as the children of God today, we are not only living in the new creation but are called to share it with others. Because you and I have the capacity to care, to act, to give and to pray for those without homes and clean water. We are called to give comfort to those who grieve and hope to those battling addiction and warmth to those who are cold and to do it now! And taken collectively with those others who cling to God's promise of being in the midst of a new creation, we can make a difference in the present as well as in the future.

If we turn on the news or read the paper on our ipads, it is easy to say we are living in the worst of times and throw up our hands in despair and crawl under the covers. Or we can say that we are living in the best of times. And embrace the words of Isaiah that remind us that we can share one cold drink of water at a time. We can buy one can of beans, right one wrong, let go of one grudge, claim one friendship, confess God's presence in one moment in someone's life, stand up for one person who cannot stand up for themselves and see the new creation that is all around us. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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