

“God’s Answer”

Valley Presbyterian Church – July 8, 2018

7th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 48:1-3, 9-14

Rev. John Wahl

Isaiah 65:17-25

The prophet Isaiah is speaking here to a people who have only known exile. Through his voice, God is offering a vision for a new future; one which will be more expansive than those formerly displaced people could ever imagine: an invitation into life as God’s holy ones, living in the new Jerusalem. They have suffered in exile and lost much of their joy; but they are told that old life will be shed as they enter into a new life

The world is being transformed; not destroyed. Despite what those drawn to apocalyptic images hope will happen to unbelievers, God is not in the business of blowing things up in order to start over. Instead, God is molding what God has already made into something that is more God-like. The new earth will not be so new as to be unrecognizable: for the Jerusalem they left behind decades earlier will still be there. But now, Jerusalem will be “a joy” rather than fallen into ruins, and its people will be “a delight” instead of those who run from God as fast as they can. There will be no sound of weeping; no more infant fatalities, no more early death for adults, even the 100 year-old will be considered a youngster.¹

In this new Jerusalem, the Lord will answer before anyone calls and hear while they are yet speaking. If there is no weeping or crying, it will be because any potential cause for grief is anticipated and answered before it can even be articulated. If, previously, the people’s sins and shortcomings prevented them from hearing God’s response, the communication barrier will be overcome. If their days, like ours, are marked by death – including unnaturally shortened life-spans, economic injustice, terror and sadness – then Isaiah’s audience anticipate an unspeakable joy that we understand through the promise of life made known in Christ.

God creates a new reality; turning the once profane city of Jerusalem into holy space. Divine blessings radiate from that center into the wilderness. Every day, God transforms and recreates a world of harmony, prosperity and joy. In today’s world, this notion is sometimes interpreted as the “prosperity gospel”

¹ John Holbert from *Patheos.com*

where if we praise God and do the right things, God will reward us individually with personal wealth. But the picture of prosperity in Isaiah is not one of individual gain, but communal harmony; a community that is defined in its broadest terms. The blessings are not demonstrated by the wealth of some, but when even the things that might harm us do not; when even the poorest and most at risk prosper and live to a ripe old age.²

But like the ancient Hebrew people, we often perceive more peril than prosperity, more oppression and injustice than blessings and enduring peace. Whether children in Thailand that are trapped in a cave, or children at our borders separated from their parents; people in Japan facing flooding or families in our Western states fleeing from forest fires; these are in many ways disturbing and disruptive times in which we live. These stories of chaos and fear – globally, nationally and locally – can so consume us that we become drawn in and unable to free ourselves from the weight of despair.

And so we commit ourselves in our homes, churches, schools, and neighborhoods to join in the work of healing and hope; the same work Jesus proclaims at the start of his ministry when he comes to the synagogue in Nazareth and reads from the scroll of Isaiah: “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.”

We commit ourselves to this work; we deeply believe in it, we proclaim its gospel promise and truth. And we remind ourselves, over and over, that God is in our very midst; and so in all matter of things, all will be well. And yet, in the midst of chaos and fear, injustice and devastation, we find ourselves – probably more often than we would like to admit – responding to one another in ways that, rather than giving hope and healing, in fact perpetuate the very fear and chaos from which we are seeking and striving to be free.

For the most part, we are patterned in our responses: call them ruts, grooves or patterns; the truth is, we are routinized in the way we respond to one another – particularly when we are in chaos, distress or anxiety – as more reaction than response. We might catch ourselves a moment or two later, or perhaps reflect back weeks or years later, and wonder, *why did I ever respond that way? And why, over and over?* In those moments of clarity, we wonder, *why did I lash out that way?*

² Corrine Carvalho from *Workingpreacher.com*

*Why do I not notice how I am putting another person down? And if, by chance, I do notice, why can I not stop?*³

It is here, in these holy wonderings, that God speaks to the people through the voice of Isaiah, saying, “I am about to create a new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.” This is the voice and presence of God offering good news – release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, hope that the oppressed will go free. This is an invitation to nurture the growth of peace and joy among God’s people and in God’s creation. And it begins with the release from the binding and blinding routine of our old ways of being.

A recent scientific study shed some light on this reality of this patterned thinking of humans. What researchers found is that approximately 93% of our thoughts are repetitive and useless. And of this 93%, nearly 80% of our thoughts are negative – reflective of all the fear and anxiety and chaos around us.⁴

So, what do we do with this? What is God’s holy, healing invitation to us on this day and in this place? We could begin with noticing when we catch ourselves in the middle of patterned responses and commit to practice a different way of being. Practice is the intentional seeking and striving to live in a new way to which God is calling us; something that can be difficult to do. Just ask the “wolf and the lamb feeding together” – this image that Isaiah offers us that, while deeply loved, has in many ways become so domesticated that it perhaps no longer catches our breath with its powerful proclamation of transformation. This image of the wolf and the lamb points to the disruptive power of God to change even our most ingrained ways; the strongest patterns by which we habitually live.

Let’s explore this image a little more deeply, starting with the wolf. Can you imagine the wolf’s confusion at the first suggestion of sharing table fellowship with the lamb, without that lamb becoming the main course? What would the wolf’s parents think – what would they eat instead for dinner that night? And what about the lamb? Taught by her elders from day one to stay as far away as possible from the wolf, what would her flock say if it ever found out about her desire to invite the wolf to play together?

It’s a disruptive image; and yet, one that holds within its offering the proclamation of the good news of God’s power to transform even our most ingrained ways of being. Not that it will happen right away; transformation is

³ Julia Rusling, “A Holy Disruption”

⁴ As referenced by Rusling

rarely sudden; rather, it seems to emerge and take hold over time – first noticing, then wondering, eventually opening up to a new possibility and trusting in the realness of God’s presence and grace. Often, it takes a community of support to create the courage necessary to choose something new; it’s a journey that unfolds slowly and gradually.

And yet, here – as God’s people – we find ourselves on this journey; starting to notice what the new creation is beginning to open up to us. We see that the fear that once had eaten away at us might lose its grip, and the very places and circumstances where we never thought we could choose differently instead being to bloom with possibility; that we are afforded an opportunity to choose to respond in love and presence, to find and work for ways to lift up the brokenhearted, to assist in helping the oppressed go free or bring new vision to the blind.

This is how we join with God in created God’s new creation in our neighborhood: a place where we are all invited to live and move and have our being free of fear and injustice; a place where all are invited to live with joy and delight; a place where all people can flourish: where all can prosper through the work of their own hands; where all can live in homes they built, and where all can enjoy the fruit of the vineyards they have planted; where all can live together – like wolf and lamb – in peace and wholeness.

This co-creating with God takes work. But in it, we rejoice because we are active participants with God in this transformation of ourselves and our world. When the things of this world seem out of step with Isaiah’s vision of the new Jerusalem, we can take heart, because our awareness of that contrast between what has been and what will be means that we are moving toward the joyful anticipation of new life.

The patterns within us might be strong, but God is at work, around us and through us, making all things new – even the ways that we take notice and respond. The new Jerusalem may come slowly and gradually, but it will arrive fully. God’s vision for our lives, our families, and our communities is of reconciliation and joy. For all that in our life today is fearful and chaotic, this is God’s answer: all things will be made new. AMEN.