

17 November 2013

Isaiah 65:17-25

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### **A Choice for Wholeness**

There are a lot of things we don't know about Isaiah, but I think I know what school he went to.

He lived at the same time as Haggai, 500-and-some years before the birth of Jesus, but I don't think they went to the same school.

Haggai's message, we heard it last week, was this: go up to the hills and bring wood and build God's house. Take courage and work, and rebuild that temple, folks!

Isaiah is all about rebuilding as well, and he's all about the temple.

But Isaiah, I think, went to the same school as Antoine de Saint Exupery. Do you remember him? He's the author of The Little Prince, which a lot of us probably read at some point in our schooling.

He wrote: "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea."

That's Isaiah's method, not to drum up people and assign tasks, but to teach his people to long for the endless goodness and delight of the cosmos.

At a time when only one out of four infants make it to adulthood, he stirs the longing of the people for a time when every child grows up to live a long life.

Coming off a time of vast inequality, the longing for a time when everyone is able to make a living and have a roof over their heads.

It's so at odds with the reality they're living of suffering and disillusionment, and that's *exactly* why we need these prophets.

To stir up our longing for what is really real.

Can you see it, Israel?, he says. I am about to create new heavens and a new earth!

Hear me now. This is the future that I am creating.

Jerusalem will be a joy, its people a delight.

No more shall there be the sounds of weeping or the cry of distress.

No more shall there be an infant who lives only a few days, or an old person who does not live a long life.

The people will build houses and inhabit them, plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

Their days will be as long as the days of a tree.

And that's not all! Listen to this part – wolves and lambs will come together to eat. Lion and ox, same thing.

They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.

This is not the first time that Isaiah has proclaimed God's vision of universal peace, but it is surely one of the most stirring.

It's that vision we hear not only from Isaiah but throughout scripture, the word in Hebrew is *shalom*, that rich, broad, deep peace that means well-being for all creation.

I read these words of Walter Brueggemann years ago but I return to them every once in a while, to be reminded that in the Bible,

“all of creation is one, every creature in community with every other, living in harmony and security toward the joy and well-being of every other creature...

the most staggering expression of the vision is that all persons are children of a single family, members of a single tribe, heirs of a single hope, and bearers of a single destiny,

namely, the care and management of all of God's creation.”

Peace not as the world gives it but as God envisions it, all the elements and forces of creation working as they are intended to work, living as they are intended to live.

In the gospels it's the kingdom of God or the realm of God, that world the choir sang about, a world of righteousness, peace, joy.

It's community, friendship, agreement, abundance, love, loyalty, truth, grace, salvation, justice, blessing.

Another word for it is wholeness.

It's what we were getting at several years ago when, as a denomination, we adopted an identity statement naming ourselves to be a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.

Naming our longing for this world Isaiah describes, where all creation lives in harmony and security toward the joy and well-being of every other creature.

And how do we do that?

My answer is probably not surprising to any of you, and probably not very different from what Disciples across North America would say.

We do our part.

In some places Disciples work for wholeness

by feeding struggling college students a home-cooked meal on Sunday evenings,

or hosting a farmers market and dedicating the proceeds to a Native American tribe.

Other places they're part of the movement by educating people about the new healthcare law,

or hosting Beer & Hymns in their fellowship hall.

Here at Central we share food and clothing with people, and advocate for people

who build houses that others inhabit, or plant crops that others eat –

those who are marginalized in our economic system.

We speak up, as a number of us will do through letter writing after worship and a press conference tomorrow, as and for people who are GLBT, and marginalized by what I believe to be a misguided reading of scripture and misunderstanding of human sexuality.

We do our part, and this takes us back to Haggai: we take courage and work.

I love the story I read in a Mennonite publication about the Guang'an New Hope Deaf Child Training Center in eastern China.

It had at the time 14 students, the youngest was 2 years old and the oldest 9.

They come from all over the province, so all but two of them live at the center with their teacher and two assistants.

The goal is to help the children learn to speak and listen well enough to function in public school.

So from the moment that their teacher, Ms. Wang, puts on each child's hearing aid at breakfast to the time that she takes them off at bedtime, they encourage the children to use language.

So many of them have lived so many years without being able to express themselves that the teachers want them to speak loudly, to gain confidence.

They use a lot of repetition, and tongue exercises, they teach them rhymes and song,

Ms. Wang, the teacher, is an accountant by training, but her interest lies in teaching.

Here's what she says about her work:

“My job is very significant because it can change the destiny of a child.”

We do our part, the best we can do, and that's a lot, because it can change the course of someone's life.

But you know, there's something even more basic that we need to do to live God's *shalom*, and that's to change the course of our own life.

I picked up Parker Palmer's book this week called [A Hidden Wholeness](#).

Parker Palmer, you may know, is not only a writer but also an educator, and a Quaker.

He's written several books and this one came out almost ten years ago.

My sister had given it to me a while back and I'd read 15 or 20 pages, and there it had sat on the headboard of my bed until it jumped off my headboard and into my hands earlier this week.

Apparently I needed it.

There was a time, Parker Palmer recalls, when farmers on the Great Plains, at the first sign of a blizzard, would run a rope from the back door out to the barn,

so that if they were in the barn when the storm hit, they could make their way back to the house.

Today we live in a blizzard of another sort,

which swirls around us as economic injustice, ecological ruin, physical and spiritual violence,

and swirls within us as fear, greed, deceit and indifference to the suffering of others.

And in that blizzard we wander off and become separated from our own souls, our life-giving core that hungers for truth and justice, love and forgiveness.

We end up living lives that are often divided from soul.

I have a dear friend who I only see occasionally, but when I do see her she usually greets me by saying, "How's your soul?"

And I'm always a little taken aback because it's a very different question than asking, "How are you?"

How are you?, I can answer: "I'm *good*, how are you?"

How's your soul?, I have to stop and think about. And I usually don't know.

Living divided lives has a high price.

We commit ourselves to projects we don't really believe in.

We keep silent on issues we should address.

We deny our own inner darkness or project it onto other people, making enemies where none exist.

We withhold a personal gift that might serve a good end.

Still, there is a strong incentive to live divided lives,

because listening to our souls can have a high price too.

Do you remember the names Cynthia Cooper, Coleen Roley, and Sherron Watkins (not our Sharon Watkins)?

They were named by Time Magazine as their Persons of the Year in 2002, for confronting corruption at WorldCom, the FBI, and Enron – whistle-blowing, as the media puts it.

They were honored by Time but reviled by some of their ex-colleagues.

“There is a price to be paid,” one of them said in an interview. “There have been times I could not stop crying.

The divided life may be all around us and in us, but wholeness is always a choice.

Whether you’re disillusioned about your return from exile,

or grieving the losses that life has handed you,

or riding high at the top of your game.

When a person is given space to listen to his or her soul, hear its voice, and find the courage to act on what it says, it unleashes a tremendous power for good in the world.

Derek Walcott has written:

*The time will come  
when, with elation,  
you will greet yourself arriving  
at your own door, in your own mirror,  
and each will smile at the other's welcome,  
and say, sit here. Eat.  
You will love again the stranger who was your self.*

*Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart  
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you  
all your life, whom you ignored  
for another, who knows you by heart.  
Take down the love letter from the bookshelf,  
the photographs, the desperate notes,  
peel your own image from the mirror.  
Sit. Feast on your life.*

(“Love After Love”)

Imagine with me that world of Isaiah, that realm of God's *shalom*,

where all children live to adulthood, without fear of disease or gun violence,

where everyone has access to good medical care,

everyone earns a living wage,

enemies live together in peace,

hurt and destruction are a thing of the past.

Imagine with me your own life lived in harmony with the *shalom* of the world and the stirrings  
of your soul.

Don't you want to be a part of that kingdom?