

**Isaiah 65:17-19a (NRSV) **The Glorious New Creation****

- 17** For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;  
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.  
**18** 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.  
**19** I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people;  
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress.

**Luke 21:10-19 (NRSV)**

**10** Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom;  
**11** there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

**12** “But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. **13** This will give you an opportunity to testify. **14** So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; **15** for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. **16** You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. **17** You will be hated by all because of my name. **18** But not a hair of your head will perish. **19** By your endurance you will gain your souls.

***“God’s Way of Future Hope”***

An elderly man lay dying in his bed. In death’s agony, he suddenly smelled the aroma of his favorite chocolate chip cookies wafting up the stairs. He gathered up all of his remaining strength, and lifted himself from the bed. Leaning against the wall, he slowly made his way out of the bedroom, and with even greater effort lowered himself down the stairs, gripping the railing with both hands.

With labored breath, he leaned against the doorframe, gazing into the kitchen. There, spread out on the kitchen table, were literally hundreds of his favorite chocolate chip cookies. Had he died and gone to heaven? Or was it merely one final act of heroic love from his devoted wife, making sure that he left this world a happy man?

Mustering one more arduous effort, the man threw himself toward the table. His aged, withered, and trembling hand made its way to a cookie at the edge of the table, when his wife suddenly smacked it with a spatula.

“Stay out of those,” she screeched, “They’re for your funeral!”

One of the most inevitable events of life is that death will come to all of us. And while that may seem like a morbid thought, it’s good to be able to smile at death occasionally. The Bible, however, does more than smile at death, it laughs at death. In mockery the apostle Paul calls out to death saying, *“Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”* (I Cor. 15: 54b-55)

It is in the face of mortality that Isaiah and Jesus, in our scripture readings, offer prophecies of end time that remind us that no matter how difficult things get in this life, God is preparing for us life that is fresh and new and eternal in one’s faith in Christ. From both Isaiah and Jesus, we hear of traditional beliefs that are interwoven memories of ancient times, the current condition of creation, and the promises of a radiant future for those who believe.

For the Hebrew people hearing Isaiah’s prophecy, they knew first hand the devastation of the Babylonian invasion, the destruction of their holy temple, the forcible dislocation of Judean leaders, and their own individual and collective sinfulness. Yet, Isaiah promises that these painful challenges of the past will no longer be considered, for God is creating a “new heaven and a new earth.” And the inhabitants of this new heaven and new earth will be living proof of God’s love for creation, despite its past sinfulness. For God delights in those endeavoring to live by faith.

In our Lukan text, Jesus is also offering prophetic preaching to prepare his disciples and followers for the challenges they will face in life and faith as they journey toward their eternal reward. While this text seems on the surface to be a prediction of dooms day, it is actually a message of HOPE. I cannot count on both hands the number of times when the world was experiencing a natural disaster that people would approach me and ask if this was the sign that the end was near. In my reading of Jesus’ prophesy, the earthly disasters, and breakdowns in human relationships are experiences in this life which prepare us for the utter delight of life eternal with God.

Jesus speaks here of wars and earthquakes, famines and plagues, omens and tragedies, persecution and battles within families — even death itself. In other apocalyptic scripture texts we hear of fire and smoke, the moon turning to blood, incurable disease and disfigurement. In other

words, Jesus does not sugar-coat what we will face in life on this earth, especially as we live counter-culturally according to our faith. **BUT, Jesus assures his listeners that what they are experiencing is NOT the end, but the period of tribulations through which believers will enter God’s eternal reign.**

So, when people today observe destructive wildfires, earthquakes, floods, and unprecedented weather events; when we hear of chemical weapons of war being used against children, youth, and adults, genocide, and oppression; when we see peoples within our own nation entangled in wars of power, control, unbridled gun violence, defending one’s political turf, mysogeny, racism, and xenophobia, the fracture of the human family and persecution due to one’s faith — none of this signals that the end is near. ‘Nor that we should stop trying to bring God’s reign on earth as it is in heaven. **Rather, Jesus reminds us, “by your endurance you will gain your souls!”**

As much as we would like to hop on some “celestial lift,” press the button marked “Paradise” and be whisked to the “heavenly floor,” quickly and comfortably, with no pain and suffering, this is just not reality. And even though death often brings sadness into our lives when someone dear to us leaves this life, and even though death can be distressing when we see how people suffer before their last moment in this life, there is no reason to see death as a tragic mystery, as something that makes no sense. For we are assured that even the smallest kernel of faith is enough to birth a whole new life in a home **free from** pain, suffering, want, and the curse of eternal death. For God is still creating within us, around us, for us.

This morning in our first hymn we sang:

*Come we that love the Lord, and let our joys be known,  
Join in a song with sweet accord, join in a song with sweet accord  
And thus surround the throne, and thus surround the throne.  
We’re marching to Zion, beautiful, beautiful Zion;  
We’re marching upward to Zion, the beautiful city of God.*

Yesterday morning on the CBS news, Jeff Glor reported on the 100th anniversary of Zion National Park, which he called, one of the most beautiful places on earth. He also reminded us that the name ZION was given to those places of incomparable and eternal beauty. In our salvific

history, both the Hebrew and Christian people referred to Zion as that place where God’s creation and the expressions of faith reach their transcendent pinnacle. So, the hill upon which the temple was built was called Zion. Many people refer to heaven, the city of God, and Zion interchangeably. Whatever we call it, I cling to the HOPE that God has a time and space of BLISS in store for people of faith who have journeyed through the tribulation. Think of it: unending joy, unconditional love, freedom from worry, the absence of greed, jealousy, power struggles, prejudice, and all the rest.

Friends, let’s keep our eyes fixed on Jesus leading us through tribulation to reach Zion. Perhaps, just perhaps, those proverbial “best chocolate chip cookies in all of heaven and earth” will be waiting for us when we arrive! Thanks be to God. Let us pray:

PRAYER of CONFESSION (unison)

**O God, we are more like the vision in Luke than the vision of Isaiah.**

**We see wars, hatred, and violence everywhere, yet despair of ever stopping them. We see oppression and injustice and persecution, but fail to raise our voices in prophetic protest. We have become a pessimistic people. Help us believe—really believe—in Isaiah’s vision of the peaceable kin-dom, in your promise of a new heaven and new earth. Let your cry be our cry: “They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.” Amen.**

Words of Assurance

*These are not only words of challenge. They offer us hope in our faith in God’s salvation through Christ. God equips us to embody both challenge and hope, as we are bound together by God’s love. Amen.*