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Something New

Isaiah 65:18a

What a tremendous image Isaiah offers us. It's creation all over again but with some upgrades. The garden of perfection is back and has become the peaceful city of God—a new Jerusalem. The curses that came from Adam and Eve's incident with the snake and the apple are cleared away so that, in this new paradise, we will enjoy our labors, not sweat by them. We will not have the concern of death, no matter what tree we eat of, and God will come to us before we can even call. It truly is a new creation, a new world in which to live.

While this description sounds wonderful and we wonder where we can sign up to live in such a place, there is a rub: one event—the Genesis garden—is a beloved story of a past time and the other—our Isaiah account—has not happened. In fact, in the last several thousand years we have seen little evidence of its fruition. If the message cannot be proven, its golden age pointed to, then it is crucial that we look to the messengers. One such group of messengers are those who originally wrote down this promise so we can read it even today. Their situation helps us understand the message. Here is what I mean: you can have the same message but it can mean quite different things depending on the messenger. Perhaps many of us have been in the following situation: you have experienced a death of someone you love, or a medical crisis, or a terrible sadness. In the midst of this someone you know arrives, upon hearing of your plight, they pat you on the arm, cajoling you, and quoting Scripture saying, “You know all things work together for those who love God!” In this case their message is clear: they have not grasped the difficult reality in which you live. They are giving an easy answer that keeps them at an arm's length from your pain: “you know, one day there will be a new heaven and a new earth and we just won't even remember any of this!” They just don't get it. Not only would you not believe them but you would turn from any message they had to offer.

If many of us have experienced such a moment I hope and pray we have also experienced its counterpart. When we were grieving, frightened or lost a friend or family member whose own struggles were known, who we knew at times had been broken-hearted, who had even been rubbed raw in places by the tragedies of life, that person sat before us with cautious humility, looked us in the eye and whispers, “even now, even through it all, I know all things work together for those who love God.” The message is the same and yet it has been transformed. We can believe it because it is voiced within the midst of our current reality, not outside of it.

It is this second type of messenger we meet here in Isaiah. Isaiah's book is made up of three parts and the majority of the first two sections offer the beginnings of a glorious age. People who had been forced from their homes are able to return and hopes are high that a new paradise is near. New leadership comes forth, plans for a peaceful city begin, lives start over. The third section of Isaiah, however, shows a very different conclusion to what began so well. The last ten chapters of this great work are facing the reality that none of this promise has come to pass. The leaders turned out to be frauds, the peaceful city is still in turmoil and people who wanted to start again find they still face famine and want. Their utopia has not come, not even close. It is within this context, one of humility and realism, not one of pride and fantasy, that the people share this message of a new creation. Even

now, even through it all, they say, we believe God will bring a new heaven and a new earth. Yes, we can trust these messengers.

If we are struggling—searching desperately for something new, some sign or portent or miracle that will prove a new city, a new day, is on its way—perhaps we should stop searching for what we might believe in, what sign would be proof enough, what miracle would finally stop our questions, and start asking ourselves who it is we believe in. Isaiah’s audience could not put their faith in proven events because those events had not unfolded. The message had not come about. Instead they put their faith in the messenger, the one who had made the promise, the one who had led them in the past. The same is true for us. While it is important to look to the ancient messengers, those who wrote it; the original messenger—our God who offered it—is far more important to consider. When we consider, not what we believe in but who, this is the God we meet:

We meet a Caregiving God who considers and redeems even the most forgotten of the world. Heaven for our Lord would be to change the plight of even the weakest of infants and frailest of old men. Sterile hospital rooms and stuffy nursing homes are some of God’s primary domains. They have not been forgotten at all and they are where God can be found.

We meet a Monday-Friday God who considers and redeems even our everyday. Heaven for our Lord is not just to lighten and uplift the special moments of our lives but the day-in-day-out grind of our existence. Our menial labors would be a joy. We should each get to live in a home and not worry about its safety; plant gardens and not wonder if we will get to see their harvest. Doing the dishes and dropping the kids off at school are not throw-away moments but they are where God can be found.

Finally, here in Isaiah, we meet a Lover God who considers and redeems...us. Heaven for our Lord is to give us complete access to him when we are in need. Before we call, God would like to answer. While we are still offering a prayer, God would like to hear us and attend to us. We are not minor players in this world. We are everything to God and we are where God can be found.

This caregiver, Monday-Friday, lover God is the messenger. This is who we believe in and, if that is true then the what, how and when of the promised future can wait. The signs and miracles take a back seat because this God we believe in has made a promise and this messenger can be believed. As we gather at tables later this week stacked high with filled plates and platters we truly have tremendous things to be thankful for. If your tradition is to go around that Thanksgiving table and share your thanksgivings (or even if it is not) consider the true thanksgiving we have in our lives. It is not what God has done for us, although that may be considerable, but who God is—who, through it all, God has been shown to be. That is worth being truly thankful.