

Stop! Wake Up!

Isaiah 65:17-25

I love this vision in Isaiah of how the people of Israel are promised this new heaven and new earth where life is truly abundant: No infant mortality, no premature death, no war, and people actually enjoying each other and even diversity is celebrated. Wow! It sounds like the kingdom of God which Jesus talked about so much: A life where God is the center and not our fears and problems. Yet somehow I can't help but say that our daily life does not reflect that vision of Isaiah. Even the people of ancient Israel at the time of Isaiah's vision knew that their daily life was so far away from that vision. Almost 50 years prior to that vision, they were forced out of their homes to live in a foreign land as refugees. Being in Babylon in exile for almost 50 years, they were dreaming of Jerusalem being a great place only to come back and find out that it was in ruins with a shabby temple. After returning to their homes and the homes of their ancestors, they were disappointed to see that life was not as great as they had been promised. For almost 50 years, they kept thinking about Jerusalem and how things would be perfect once they got back. What a disappointment!

I don't know about you, but I know that for me our current reality is not very close to Isaiah's vision of a new heaven and a new earth. There are major needs in our world that often go unnoticed: One-sixth of the world's population lives in absolute poverty, nearly a million children each year are sold or forced into the sex-trafficking trade, more than 850 million people in the world go hungry, war is still a mode of operations, 90% of people in prison in the United States lived in poverty most of their lives, etc. So, how can we claim the vision of Isaiah today? How could his message been relevant to his people at the time? Was he selling them a pie in the sky? Was he trying to tell us about a vision for eternal life? Maybe he was talking about a different world, the second coming or something like that!

As we study the text for today, we find the word "create" in it to be the central idea. God is about to create. God is creating this vision. This word in Hebrew, "bara," is only used for God. It is the same verb that was used in Genesis in the story of creation. This word is used in Isaiah about 17 times to help us focus on God's continued act of creation. We often think of God creating the earth and then being done. Yet, in this vision, Isaiah reveals to us that God's act of creation is not done. It is continuous. The kingdom of God, the realm of God when people and God live in close relationship, has been started but it is still in process. God is not done with us yet! Our hope comes because we know that God is still involved in creating, shaping and transforming us. And the key is to pay attention to what God is doing right now in our lives.

The people of Israel were so conditioned to their ways of living separately from God. They worshipped God in the temple, yet they forgot the commandments about welcoming the stranger and sharing their wealth and the love of God with other nations. They became focused on themselves. They liked the idea of being the chosen people, yet they forgot that they were chosen so that others may know God through them. They turned away from the ways of God many times and finally their kingdom was destroyed by the Babylonians and they were taken away from their comfort zones to be refugees in a foreign country. When they returned, instead of focusing on their relationship with God, they focused on what didn't work for them and their dreams. So the call of the prophet Isaiah was a wake-up call! It was an invitation to stop dreaming about the glories of the past and become more grounded in God's new creation of the people.

We are often stuck in our past ideals or in our future dreams. We sometimes have a hard time paying attention to what God is doing right now in our midst. We miss out on the power of God that is right within our reach for the sake of a mere illusion. We have been conditioned in many different ways to react the same way our ancestors did. I am often surprised when I find myself saying something to my daughter that my mother used to say to me. Instead of seeing my relationship with her as unique and paying attention to how God is leading me in that relationship, I slip into the old comfortable ways of parenting like I was parented. This is the case in most of our lives. In his book, *Anger*, Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, talks about a little boy whose father would react with anger at him every time he made a mistake. Anger was passed on in his family from generation to generation. Out of his loving concern the father would often yell at the boy when he fell down or hurt himself because that is what the father was conditioned to do. The boy was shocked when he found himself yelling at his brother in anger after his little brother fell off his bicycle and hurt himself. This story shows how we get so conditioned that we lose our ability to see things as they really are, to pay attention to where God is leading us, to be truly present to others, especially those we love, in a non-judgmental way.

There is richness in our heritage, yet it has to be put in the context of the present moment of where God is leading us. So, with all of this, we need the grace of God to be able to be open to the new possibilities of

God's creation in us and in our world and the best way to do this, is what Jesus himself taught about paying attention to the kingdom of God right now, right here. Plato once raised this question "How can you prove whether at this moment we are sleeping, and all our thoughts are a dream; or whether we are awake, and talking to one another in the waking state?" I would say that we can begin to wake up only when we are present each moment of our days to ourselves, to God and to others. If we are able to do that, God can do amazing things through us. If we are able to let go of our agendas to be shaped every moment by the Holy Spirit, the whole world can be transformed because we will no longer be conditioned to tolerate poverty and greed.

Leo Tolstoy once told the story about a king who was overburdened with the tasks of state. One day, he told his wife, "If only I could know which matters were the most important, I could use my time more effectively and be a better king." So the queen urged him to consult with the wise men of the kingdom. One by one the king called the wise men to tell him: scholars and priests, politicians and counselors. Each had a different view about which matters were the most important. Eventually, in desperation, the king set off to visit a holy hermit who lived in the hills. As he got closer to the hermit's place, he saw the holy man digging his garden. The hermit hardly interrupted his work as he listened attentively to the king's request for advice. "I have two questions," The king said. "On whom should I spend my time and focus my attention? And, which affairs are the most important, and should therefore be taken care of first?" The hermit listened in silence, and continued to dig his garden. The king realized that the hermit was struggling and tired. So he offered to help him. The hermit thanked him and handed him the spade. The king dug the hermit's garden for two hours, before asking him the two questions again, but still the hermit did not answer. Instead, he took back the spade saying, "You rest now, and I'll dig." But the king refused and he went on digging until sundown. When he finally put down the spade, he said to the hermit, "I came to ask you two questions. Since you cannot, or will not answer me, I will go home now." The hermit answered, "Look, someone is running here. Let's see who it is." The king turned to see a bearded man running toward them, clutching his hands to a wound in his stomach. As he reached the king, he fell to the ground, moaning. The hermit and the king quickly washed and dressed the man's wound. Then they carried him into the hermit's hut. Exhausted after the day's work, the king also fell asleep. The next morning, the king woke up and saw that the wounded man was staring at him. "Forgive me," he begged the king. The king said "I don't know you, I have no reason to need to forgive you." Then the man confessed that he had sworn vengeance on the king for executing his brother, and that he had followed the king to the hermit's home, planning to kill him. When the king didn't return for so long, the man came out of his hiding place, and was caught by the king's bodyguards, who recognized and attacked him. He managed to escape but would have bled to death if the king didn't take care of him. The man said, "I wanted to kill you, but you saved my life. From now on, I will be your most faithful servant. Forgive me." The king forgave the man and promised to help him.

Then the king returned to the hermit, who was digging his garden again. "For the last time," he pleaded, "will you answer my two questions?" The hermit said, "But you have had your answers." The king said, "I don't understand." So the hermit told him, "Yesterday, you had compassion for my weariness, and you stayed here to help me dig my garden. If you had gone straight home, our friend here would have attacked you. So, the most important task was to show compassion. Later, when the man appeared here, it was the time to care for him, and bind his wounds. Had you not done so, he would have died and would have never been able to make his peace with you. At that moment he was the most important person, and caring for him was your most important task." So the answer to your questions is this: There is only ever one important time, and that is now." And the important person is the one who stands before us now. God gives us one opportunity at a time. The person I am with now and the task that lies immediately ahead of me are always more important than either the past or the future. The past is gone. The future may never happen. The present is the only reality."

Transformation is possible because God is continuing to create a new earth and a new heaven in our world. May we always be able to be awake to God' acts of creation and transformation in our lives and in our world in every present moment.