

Portions of Isaiah 65

*17 "See, I will create
new heavens and a new earth.
The former things will not be remembered,
nor will they come to mind.*

*19 I will rejoice over Jerusalem
and take delight in my people;
the sound of weeping and of crying
will be heard in it no more.*

*20 "Never again will there be in it
infants who live but a few days,
or older people who do not live out their years;
those who die at a hundred
will be thought mere youths;
those who fail to reach a hundred
will be considered accursed.*

*For as the days of a tree,
so will be the days of my people;
my chosen ones will long enjoy
the work of their hands.*

*23 They will not labor in vain,
nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune;
for they will be a people blessed by the LORD,
they and their descendants with them.*

*24 Before they call I will answer;
while they are still speaking I will hear.*

Introduction to the New Testament Scripture

Today is the last Sunday of the Summer Book Club, when we've been reading through the New Testament. It only makes sense as we finish the New Testament that I preach from the end of the last book in the Bible, Revelation.

Revelation is filled with wild imagery and numerology. The Holy Spirit inspires the author with an apocalyptic vision. The details are often difficult to understand, but the main theme of the book is not. Its main theme is that even though the church and individuals go through difficulties, God wins in the end.

Listen now to today's passage, Revelation 21:1-6, where we learn about the new heaven and the new earth, and the proclamation from Jesus on the throne that God will wipe every tear away from our eyes.

Revelation 21:1-6a (TNIV)

1 Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

5 He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

6 He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End."

I recently read a quote from a Christian that really surprised me. I couldn't believe who wrote it in their journal. It said this:

“Lord, my God, who am I that You should forsake me? . . . I call, I cling, I want—and there is no One to answer—no One on Whom I can cling—no, No One... When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven, there is such convicting emptiness that these very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul. I am told that God loves me—and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.”

I wasn't surprised so much by the content of what it said, even though the author was surprising to me. When we're honest with ourselves, we feel the pain that comes out in the quote. We know that life isn't what we want it to be, and there are times when God seems absent. Of course, it's easy to get caught up in all the activity of the end of summer and the beginning of fall, and act like everything is fine.

But...when we stop to catch our breath, a feeling of dread can come over us...dread that life just isn't the way we want it to be. Some of you feel this so acutely. You know about spouses with mental illnesses...about loved ones with drinking problems...about plans which don't ever seem to come true...about lost jobs and dashed hopes....You wonder where God is in the midst of all of this.

And when we look at the world around us, it's not much better. 3000 people killed by Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico. A 9-year-old committing suicide after being bullied. Ongoing wars in South Sudan, Iraq, and Somalia. We know what it means to feel like our prayers simply bounce off heaven's door without ever being answered..

So the ideas of the quote aren't so surprising. We often do feel forsaken by God. But the author? Mother Teresa, the nun from India who was named a saint in 2016.

If Mother Teresa is begging God to show up, then it's okay for us to beg God to show up. We long for God to make things right...to be here with us. We long for God to be God...to end the pain and the struggles and the suffering and the illness. We long for God to show up, and to do away with these things, once and for all.

The Good News of the Gospel is that God has shown up. God has already come in Christ. The God of the universe entered this world as a little Jewish baby, so that we could rejoice. We rejoice because Christ is already here with us now, and he gives us abundant life. We can rejoice because Christ has already given us victory over sin and death.

There is an "already" quality to our faith—Jesus has already come to us. We talk about this "already" virtually every Sunday—Christ has already risen, Christ has already forgiven us, Christ has already saved us. The "already" is the good news of the Gospel.

And yet, we struggle. We despair. We weep. We weep because this "already" is matched by a "not yet." A "not yet" that we don't talk about nearly as often. A "not yet" that recognizes our pain and sorrow. So we weep because even though Christ has already come, He has not yet wiped out despair and pain and death. There are still dreams that don't come true. There are still fathers who no longer recognize their children. There are still war zones in too many places around the globe. We still long for God to show up and be God, and make these things right...And God has not yet done these things.

So we straddle the "already" and the "not yet." We rejoice in the "already," even as we wait for the dread of the "not yet" to finally be banished...for the pain of the "not yet" to dissolve into the "already" of the promise we have in Christ.

And as we wait, God speaks to us about that promise in our scriptures today. After all, as theologian Jurgen Moltmann once said in his book, *The Theology of Hope*,

God's future is not merely the unveiling of something that was hidden, but also the fulfilment of something that was promised.

In the midst of our despair, God's promises us in our scriptures today that:

There will come a day when I will be right there with you,
walking by your side.

There will come a day when I wipe the tears away from your
eyes.

There will come a day when I end all death, all mourning, all
crying, and all pain.

There will come a day when I make everything new.

I am the Alpha and the Omega. I am the beginning and the end.
There will come a day.

These scriptures give us hope in the midst of despair—and this hope is the cornerstone of our life in Christ. Moltmann goes on to say,

The Christian finds the way of life—but it is hidden in the promised future of Christ that has not yet appeared. Thus the believer becomes essentially one who hopes. Our future depends utterly and entirely on the outcome of the risen Lord's course, for we have staked our future on the future of Christ.

The believer becomes essentially one who hopes. We look for shoots of hope, telling us that the resurrection is on its way. We celebrate these shoots of “already,” poking out of the frozen ground of “not yet.”

Meanwhile, we live in this in between time...in the already and the not yet, when we see these shoots of hope even in the midst of the despair of our lives.

A couple I’ll call “John and Laura” know what it’s like to live like this. When I knew them they were a young couple from the church where I served in Atlanta with a little boy who’s as “already” as you can imagine. He’s an active, fun, precocious little boy who is full of joy. He reminds them what life can be...He reminds them that Christ has already brought abundant life, here and now. He’s a glimpse of this “already” even in a world that isn’t yet what we long for it to be.

Laura and John need to be reminded about this “already,” because of how the “not yet” came crashing in on them some time ago. Their first child “Hilary” was about six weeks old when I got a call one Friday morning to go rushing to the hospital. I found out when I got there that Laura had fallen asleep while Hilary was breastfeeding, and when Laura awoke her baby was unconscious. Hilary never woke up. At her funeral, the “not yet” of her little, pink, pillowed coffin was so heartbreaking that there were people who came in the door for the service, and turned around and left.

To be honest, I hardly remember what I said at that funeral. But I know what I wish I had said. I wish I had said that the Bible’s promises are true: that there will come a day when no infants live only a few days...that there will come a day when God will wipe every tear from our eyes...that there will come a day when there will be no more death. I wish I had said that one day there will be a world where babies don’t die and mommies and daddies don’t cry and everything is finally, once and for all, the way God wants it to be.

I wish I had said that the “not yet” is a liar. It tries to tell us that “not yet” means “never”—that there’s no hope; that this is all there is.

But we know better. We know one day Christ will come back, to dwell with us, to save us. One day Jesus will come and overwhelm the dread of the “not yet” with the joy of the “already.” One day the One who came back from the dead will come back again, and the “not yet” will be no more.

So we rejoice: not because the “not yet” has gone away, but because it will. We rejoice, because there will come a day when the “already” is all we know.

In the name of the one who is, and who was, and who is to come. Amen.