

April 4, 2010 Easter (Early Service)

ISAIAH 65:17-25

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.  
20 No more shall there be in it  
an infant that lives but a few days,  
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;  
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,  
and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.  
21 They shall build houses and inhabit them;  
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.  
22 They shall not build and another inhabit;  
they shall not plant and another eat;  
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,  
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.  
23 They shall not labor in vain,  
or bear children for calamity;  
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord--  
and their descendants as well.  
24 Before they call I will answer,  
while they are yet speaking I will hear.  
25 The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,  
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;  
but the serpent--its food shall be dust!  
They shall not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain,  
says the Lord.

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There is an ongoing and troublesome theme that runs through the Old Testament, and is mentioned from time to time in the New. It is the definition of God as parent, and human beings, especially Israel as children.

It is a very effective image because many people are parents, have raised children, and

watched the generations add one unto another producing grand children, great grand children, and in some cases, great-great grandchildren. For those who did not have the good or bad fortune (you choose) to be parents, it is for certain that such people have heard or seen enough to draw near to a degree of empathy and even compassion.

That is why this particular Biblical theme is so compelling, and so incredibly understandable. One way or another, we've nearly all been there. We've raised good children and we've raised bad, probably none of them have been perfect, but neither have any been perfectly rotten. They have been in between, leaning more toward perfection or imperfection. The funny thing is that I have seen children of people who anyone who knew them and watched them would call them good conscientious parents whose children sometimes turned out to be liars and cheats, even criminals; while other parents who came from the school of "let the children raise themselves, I have more important things to do" sometimes yielded compassionate, moral, hard working children and adults.

Parents who raised naughty children have a better understanding of the sorrow that God continually expressed throughout-- especially in the work of the prophets-- the Bible.

But according to the Bible, it didn't begin with the prophets, it began with the Garden, for hadn't God decked out the nursery with all of the necessary trappings for creation and especially for that unique creation whom the psalmist described as "a little lower than the angels." And as we know, the man and woman were happy in the Garden where they were perfectly free to do anything they wished...

Well, almost anything.

And what was it about these people? They ate the fruit of the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil disobeyed God their Creator and why did they do that? Maybe because they could, but it wasn't for power; they didn't need it. It wasn't for fame; who would know? They did it for knowledge. They resented the fact that God knew some things that they did not know and besides they had been told that if they ate the fruit, they would receive a big promotion. They didn't know what a promotion was, but the serpent told them that they would be like God, knowing good and evil.

That pretty well summarizes the relationship between God and the children between that time and this, which brings us at last to our scripture passage for this morning.

The eight verses in the passage speak of a wonderful time, but this is not a time that everybody will be able to enjoy; only the good children, only the obedient ones who did what they were supposed to do. As far as the rest were concerned, God viewed them as a failed parent as a parent who had tried to do his best, would view wicked children. And to understand where those feelings emerged, we really have to do back several verses before our lesson for today where Isaiah reports the following Word of the Lord,

"I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, "Here I am, here I am," to a nation that did not call on my name. I held

out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices..."

Can you hear the sound of weeping in those words? Immediately following those words is a virtual laundry list of charges against the people of Israel, one after another through fourteen very long verses. Nothing is left out, nothing has escaped the prophet's Word from the Lord. Many people will feel the heat of God's judgment while others will rejoice in the fact that, God promised that he was about to "create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. 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."

Except that only the obedient children would receive this particular eternal Christmas present. It's a problem. We want to ask questions like, "How obedient do we have to be?" along with a few hundred others, along with all sorts of explanations, rationalizations and downright excuses for most of the times we failed our obedience test. Well too bad, should have thought about that sooner if you'd planned on being part of that new heavens and new earth sort of thing.

And don't go around thinking that because everybody speaks well of you and looks forward to seeing you in heaven that somehow any of us are guaranteed a spot there. Remember what Paul said, "God is not mocked." Remember what Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." And Jesus also said, "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets."

So we're all done for and rightly so, for we have not been the sort of children that God our most loving parent expects us to be.

But wait, isn't it Easter? Isn't the tomb empty? Hasn't Christ risen from the dead? Isn't the Christian faith about good news such that no matter how badly we have behaved, no matter how undeserving we are...

Listen to Paul once again, "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain."

It is Paul admitting that he is the least deserving and yet by the grace of God, he exclaimed, I am what I am and his grace toward me has not been in vain."

Easter is all about that grace, dispenses with the idea of good and bad. It is all replaced

with faith and hope and love as Paul would say just a bit earlier in this same letter. But the greatest of these is love.

Easter is about the greatest love that transcends good and bad.

Happy Easter! How could it be anything other than Happy!

Rev. Donald H. Smith