



God is Still the Almighty

Isaiah 65:17-25

Rev. Thomas G. James

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As I sat down to begin forming this week's message, I found myself unsure where to begin. There is so much going on in the world this week, I wasn't sure how I could offer voice to the polar opposite emotions that are being experienced in our nation, and yes, even in our congregation this week. I know that there are many – indeed over 60 million people – across this great nation who are celebrating the election results. For a large portion of that number, the results of our presidential election is the first time they feel like their voice of brokenness and despair is being heard.

And yet, I know another 60 million or more are hurting *because* of the results. I know many of you fall into this group who are baffled at the results, and unsure what such results may mean for the future of your own life, the life of your children, much less the future of our nation and the greater world around us. This group feels like the election is a green light for the bigoted and racist to run free, acting out of their ingrown hatred for minorities, women in leadership, and persons with opposing religious beliefs.

With such opposing feelings represented, I found myself at a loss for where to begin offering a word of good news. So, I spent a lot of time in my comfort zone this week looking for answers, I spent time online.

Most of you know I'm a social media junkie – I deeply appreciate the gift of interconnectedness the interwebs provide us to stay in touch with family and friends, both current and those from years past. This was not a good week to be a social media junkie. I have representatives of each group of 60 million plus on Facebook and Twitter. What I found, if my newsfeed is anything close to representative of the national landscape, and it's pretty clear, is that in our nation at large, what we have is a failure to communicate.

I don't mean we don't have people talking – you know as well as I do, there are plenty of people who have something to say. What we have is a failure to communicate – we have a problem hearing the voice of the other. People are trying to tell their story, people are trying to make their brokenness known, but by and large, on a national scale, we are unable or unwilling to hear the voice of the other.

The trouble with being unwilling or unable to hear the concerns of the other, is that even though you don't want to hear them, even though you don't want to give credibility to their voice, their voice is valid and their concerns necessary to hear. People are hurting financially across our nation and they want change in the government to help secure them; people are being killed across our nation and they want law enforcement to help protect them; people are being stripped of their rights across our nation and they want someone to include them; people are losing power across our nation and they want someone who will speak for them; people are being told they don't belong in our nation and they want someone to stand up for them; people are being told their language is not welcome here and they just want

someone to talk to them; people are being told their religion identifies them as a terrorist and they just want someone to pray with them; people are being told their skin color makes them less of a person and they just want to be seen as equal children of God; people are being told their gender makes them unworthy of job positions and they just want someone to see them for their gifts instead of their body parts.

And before anyone can say any such concerns are invalid or exaggerated, one need only open their eyes to the national response to the election, which includes a growing number of hate crimes and intolerant rhetoric that takes its root in judgment against another's education, wealth, race, and faith.

With such division and so many people literally in fear for their well-being, their future, and their lives, we come to church and we hear from the prophet this opening line in verse 17, "I am about to create new heavens and new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind."

It's hard to hear a word of future promise that says the former things will not be remembered when we take a look at the world around us. It's hard to hold on to that promise when we see the former things still so prevalent: like racism, which we thought we had overcome with the emancipation proclamation, and then we thought we had overcome again in the civil rights movement, and then we thought we had overcome again with the election of a black president; the misogyny, which we thought we had overcome with the 19th amendment or by finally having a female running for president of the United States; or the lack of care for the uninsured, which we thought we had found a solution for with New Hampshire's universal health care becoming a national thing in the Affordable Care Act; or any number of other steps forward that offered hope and promise to people who have long been told they were not equal – even though in the formation of our nation we declared them to be equal in the Declaration of Independence, which first and foremost says that all are created equal.

Isaiah is talking to a nation that, like ours, understands disappointment and brokenness. Our passage comes in Isaiah 65, just 24 verses before the end of Isaiah's writings. Under the guidance of Isaiah's work as prophet, the people of Israel had been defeated by the Assyrians and sent into exile. They had faced the wrath of the oppressor, they had been tempted to turn away from God, and indeed, they had given in to the invitation to turn from God by the tyranny of false power of the nation states surrounding them. "Isaiah is writing to a community that has turned away from God and for who the consequences of unfaithfulness are real, even unto exile."ⁱ

We can share in the argument of the people of Israel to whom the prophet is speaking, for we share a similar fear of where we are headed as a nation. "'But, O prophet,' [we can complain with the people of Israel], 'how can we know that justice and peace *will* be restored when all we see is the victory of our adversaries while we continue to suffer humiliation and defeat? When you deliver your divine word [and say], 'The former troubles are forgotten and are hidden from my sight,' do you see something that we fail to see?'"ⁱⁱ Is not this promise by the prophet just a Marxist analysis of religion as an opiate for the people?ⁱⁱⁱ Is this not just some hopeful word to draw us back to a unlikely future reality we are not even yet convinced is plausible?

I want you to know that today, I stand here wondering the same things as you and as the people of Israel who were scattered in exile: for truly as a people – as a nation and as a community, we are broken and we are yearning for a new promise of hope.

As we sit in the darkness, as we sit in a world that allows for hatred, bigotry, misogyny, xenophobia, and racism, as we sit in wonder for what the future holds, I want you to hear me loud and clear when I say this – we can sit no more. We can be silent no more. We can pass by opportunities to offer God’s love no more. We can wait in anticipation no more. We can no longer sit idly by and wonder what the future may hold.

If you want to know what the future holds, I say to you to, do not focus on the human capacities that limit your ability to shape the future any longer. It is time we claim the promise of God of what *will be* in a world that is shaped by the way and love of God, and it’s time we start relentlessly making that love known. “At the heart of [our] faith is the Creator who emerges even in the bleakest hour of human history to create anew ... and Isaiah lifts our eyes and our hearts to contemplate on the capacities of God.”^{iv}

Do you hear the promise of God – in a world that is driven by God’s love, that is shaped by God’s will, children no longer die in infancy, but receive the love, care and education they need to live out their created purpose by God; the elderly will no longer die of war, disease, or disaster – they will see their lives fulfilled in the fullness of God’s love; people will no longer be removed from their homes, but will inhabit them and be sustained by the fruit of the earth; we will not labor in vain, but will be blessed by the promise of God to be faithful to those who are faithful; we will not wait for God to hear our cry, but we will receive God’s comfort and care even as we enter into times of brokenness and pain; we will join as one – like the wolf and the lamb – those who have ever been at war with one another will join as one in awe of the mighty love of God.

When we claim and hold on to this, God’s promise, we can no longer be silent when the voice, actions, and beliefs of others stands against such a promise.

Here at Washington Street UMC, our Mission is ‘*Making a Place for Everyone.*’ It’s our belief that ‘God is love, so we’re making a place for all to know that love.’

It’s time we get serious about what this mission means. It’s time we start focusing in on our call by God to be making a place for everyone.

Like a house party, you can vacuum the house, you can dust the shelves, you can mop the floor, you can pull out the china, you can pull out the crystal, you can set the table with all the finest linens, you can cook the meal and pour the wine, you can light the candles and turn on the nice jazz in the background – you can *prepare* a place for everyone, but if you haven’t extended the invitation, if you haven’t shared with them your desire for them to be with you, if you haven’t made them feel welcomed and loved, if you haven’t gone out of your way to meet them in their place of need – if you’re just sitting around waiting, you’re going to find yourself dining alone.

But this table – this table isn’t set for just you and me. This table is set for all to come and know that they are of sacred worth, regardless of how they dress, where they’re from, what they think, how they voted, the color of their skin, the size of their bank account, or the street on

which they live. This table, it's not our table, it's the Lord's Table, and it's a table that has as its definition an open invitation to all to come and know the great grace of the Lord as they take their place at the table.

But people don't just show up at the party, people don't just happen upon the table, and people don't just suppose they're invited. They need to know they are welcome and invited. So we can't sit anymore and hope people will happenstance upon God's love in their lives. It means we have to take ownership of our call as disciples to make that love known.

It means when you see women being spoken of as objects, you speak up for them, remind them of their gifts and worth, and tell them they are invited to the table. When you see African Americans being treated as if they matter less, you speak up for them, tell them you are thankful for their presence, their gifts, and their person, and you invite them to the table. When you see Latinos being told they are not welcome, you speak up for them, tell them they are not only welcome, but they are invited to the table. When see people being judged for being less qualified, you speak up for them, remind them that they are gifted by God with all that they need to be qualified, and then you invite them to the table. If we are going to be a place that takes seriously our call to be *Making a Place for Everyone*, we can not sit and hope people know they are worthy of being present. We must go and be intentional about offering them such an invitation.

"Following Jesus means testifying to our trust in God in the midst of circumstances that test our confidence and hope. So we keep going on, [we keep working in *Making a Place for Everyone*], with endurance as a hallmark of what it means to be a believer. We will keep witnessing to the marvelous things that the Lord has done and will continue to do, regardless of the ways in which it looks otherwise [around our nation today]."^v

Finally, hear this promise, and may it be our battle cry, "There is nothing in all of creation, or in all that we imagine beyond creation, that is beyond the capacity of God to change."^{vi} God created you and redeemed you, that you too could play a part in professing for all the world that God is still the Almighty. No matter how broken, how lost, or how hurt you may be; no matter how dark the room you find yourself in; God is bringing a great light, and God is still the Almighty. May your being – your actions, your words, your invitation to the table reflect the promise and hope of God for the world. Amen.

ⁱ Martha Sterne. *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

ⁱⁱ Paul D. Hanson. *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Isaiah 40-66*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. 1995.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} Sterne.

^v Hanson.

^{vi} Sterne.