

## *New Heavens, New Earth*

Isaiah 65: 17-25      Revelation 21: 1-8

We have two very different visions in today's scriptures, even though they suggest some of the same thing as they both speak about a new 'Jerusalem,' about 'new heavens and a new earth.' However, we really need to go back to the beginning to understand what's happening in these visions.

We need to go back to the Creation Story, to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and that rascally serpent. We know this story. With the tiniest persuasion, first Eve and then Adam cast aside God's instructions in order to pursue their own ambition, doing what they want instead of what God wants. Bear in mind that part of the allure of the fruit was the disclosure that they could "become like God." What followed was shame, fear, hiding from God, and lying, or as some say today, they had alternative facts.

In any case, God knows what happened. They can no longer remain in Eden, in Paradise. They're cast out of God's presence, no longer able to encounter God face-to-face; God is primarily encountered as a voice going forward. The humans are penalized, condemned to endure pain and suffering. They will toil and struggle for everything they need in life. They will experience death. And lest they eat from the Tree of Life and become gods themselves, it says that there were placed *cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.*

With a wonderfully designed story about walking in the garden in the cool of the day, things happen here that are reckoned as cosmic in their impact. See what happens. Humanity is cast out from the presence of God; the relationship is broken. Humans have sought to become God, acted like they were God by setting their own will above God's will. This is the primary sin of humanity; that it seeks to be God, to act of its own accord, to ignore, circumvent, or otherwise subvert God's will and make human will, human desire, into the priority. So humans are exiled from Paradise, separated from Paradise and exiled from the presence of God.

However, notice that God did not exterminate the hailed and flawed human creation. Even though betrayed by them, God remains in relationship with them, evidencing love and grace, particularly at the moment when they're least deserving.

Here is the divide between heaven and earth, between God and God's human creation. As time progresses, there is always the hope that one day, the cosmic order will be healed of the brokenness, that heaven and earth will be re-joined as God's will comes to fulfillment among humans who order their lives according to God's will and way.

The prophet Isaiah – this being Third Isaiah, 10 years after the exile has ended – envisions God doing powerful new things, despite the still depressing condition of Jerusalem. For this is not about the restoration of the Davidic monarchy or even the nation-state. This is not about simply rebuilding the still-wrecked Jerusalem Temple. This is about the path of God in cosmic scale.

Preceding our text, Isaiah has already shared God's contempt for those who refuse and reject God's will and way, judging and punishing the sinful and unjust. God also issues promises of blessings to those who are servants of God's will. But these interactions pale in comparison as Isaiah envisions things much bigger.

A new creation will be undertaken, something so utterly different that *the former things will not be remembered*. All the traditions held so dearly about the Promised Land and about Jerusalem will be eclipsed by this new work of God. God will return joy, prosperity, and long life to his people as they become *a people blessed by the Lord*. The holy city of Jerusalem will be a place of peace and blessing as *the wolf and the lamb will feed together* instead of one seeking to destroy and consume the other when there was the corrupt witness of sin as humans act as if their own individual will, personal power, and profit fulfillment were all that mattered.

God's promise of a new creation, *new heavens and a new earth*, also indicates a new relationship between God and his people. This new creation would transform their way of life as God would be prioritized and personal willfulness eliminated. The promises are extravagant, but they are promises made by God.

There is a new Jerusalem in the vision, too. The old Jerusalem, before the Babylonians came and destroyed it, was the sacred ground of God's holy mount. There stood the Temple where God would be present with God's people in the Holy of Holies. There in the old Temple, heaven and earth would touch through the divide and God would be present with God's people. Yet in this new Jerusalem, there is no mention of a new Temple where God will be, where sacrifices will take place, where the Holy of Holies will be secure from defilement. None of that is detailed. If anything, the view toward the old order of sacrifices is condemned in the next chapter.

No, faithfulness and sacred righteousness will not be defined by religious rituals and observances. It will be real life and real time. Life becomes abundant as infants live through childhood and old people enjoy many years. People are no longer exploited by the powers-that-be so that they can live in decent houses, and get paid living wages. There will be peace, equity, and justice as *the wolf and the lamb feed together and they will neither harm nor destroy on my holy mountain*. Religious rituals and observances of former times will be replaced by the fulfillment of God's will for justice, peace, and blessing, for grace, equity, and true human community.

God is not actually with God's people in the face-to-face manner of the Garden of Eden, but God is very much there with them. The text says: *Before they call, I will answer; while they are still speaking, I will hear*.

The cosmic outlines are there in Isaiah, and they will develop more fully in other prophets. In Isaiah, we discover God is working toward the fulfillment of the ancient promise, the original promise marred by human sinfulness. This would bring new life to God's people and a new relationship before God that reflects the embrace of God's will and way, and a rejection of the ways of the world, the ways of human sinfulness in

arrogance and selfishness. God's people redefine their ways, seeking out the blessings that God's order, God's will, provides.

Revelation is what cosmic visions become. The passage from Revelation 21 *sounds* a lot like Isaiah 65, but the context is *very* different. In Revelation, we have a cosmic battle between God and worldly forces of evil. God has sent his angels on a violent mission to end this world and its evil powers, to bring devastation to the unjust while restoring life to the faithful and just who had been killed by the unjust. Satan is judged and sentenced as the great white throne of the Lord descends from the heavens.

After that epic drama is ch. 21, the new Jerusalem descends from heaven, having itself been prepared by God. (That's our bulletin cover.) It replicates the Paradise out of which sinful humanity had been exiled in the Creation Story. The Eden-like restoration is fully described in the next chapter – 22. Here the punishment of death has ended and heaven and earth are joined again. The voice from the throne says explicitly: *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. 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.*

The throne of the Lord is overseeing and directing all of this, including expressions like, *To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son.*

It goes on to describe those condemned to the lake of burning sulfur – *the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, the magicians, the idolaters, and all liars.* Then it goes on to describe the heavenly Jerusalem in deeply symbolic, ornate details.

So, you can certainly hear the similarities and the differences between Isaiah and Revelation, and you can see how both are seeking to overcome the failure of human sinfulness in Eden, and envision restoration to God with the human creation. Yet how different they are.

In **Isaiah**, there is a new heaven and a new earth made possible because the prophet of God is leading the people to embrace this vision, empowering God's people to enact this vision in their lives. They are the primary actors in bringing God's way to fulfillment in the world.

In **Revelation**, the new heaven and new earth, and the heavenly Jerusalem are all made possible not because of anything God's people *did*, but because they were *powerless* to do anything. The whole Revelation epic is about God's actions while the people of God were helpless, enrapt and captive to the sinful powers of the world and incompetent to overcome them. The people of God were hopeless failures and only the ending of all things in a violent cosmic conflict *brought about by God* could enable God's purpose to be fulfilled.

In **Isaiah**, it is the people following God's model that brings about a new Jerusalem. In **Revelation**, only the righteous remnant get to see the new Jerusalem while the sinful get smoked in a lake of burning sulfur.

In **Isaiah**, forces contrary to God's justice, the powers against the people of God that exploit its weakest and most vulnerable members, comes to an end in the new Jerusalem. But in **Revelation**, the criteria are different as those whose behaviors are repugnant, governed by personal weakness and corruption, are met with a death sentence. Those people are erased, purifying the gateway for the new Jerusalem.

We could go on with the comparisons, identifying on one hand the reality-based, justice-based transformation that God prophetically seeks *from* his people in **Isaiah**, compared to the apocalypse that God violently imposes *for* his people in **Revelation**.

The point to be made is that there are two different visions of being the people of God, of being the church in the world, in these readings.

In **Isaiah's** vision, the people of God is prophetically called to engage the world and the sinful powers that rule it, and to seek to advance God's way of justice, equity, and peace in forming a new reality, a new Jerusalem, a new holy community of brothers and sisters together as God's creation made us.

In **Revelation's** vision, the people of God is focused on making itself pure and devout, seeking to preserve itself in righteousness for the final conflict, knowing that the evil and sinful are going to die a miserable and painful death.

Isaiah's vision is truer to Jesus' mission in the gospels than Revelation's vision. Jesus' ministry was about empowering people to act justly, humbly, and peacefully. For Jesus, the kingdom of God comes from seeds planted, from a pinch of yeast mixed into the dough, not from violent apocalypse, and certainly not from passively maintaining religious purity in perseverance for the day when God will act for you.

Healing the divide between heaven and earth, and ending the exile of God from God's people gets its marching orders from the cross and from the resurrection to new life. On the cross, Jesus died, not for you and me as individuals who are blessed by a personal savior. Jesus' death at the hands of sinful and willful powers is answered by the resurrection that shows the emptiness of those powers in the face of God's will for new life and peace. God's people discover new life when they throw off their captivity to the powers and embrace the way of the Lord.