

“All My Holy Mountain”

Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19

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November 17, 2019

I come before you today with a pair of passages about things to come, and some questions about how to interpret them. We have, on the one hand, a passage from Luke’s gospel, which is full of doom and gloom; and on the other hand, a passage from Isaiah, which is full of hope and expectation. In the liturgical calendar of the church, today is the last “ordinary” Sunday of the year; next week we celebrate Christ’s kingship, and the following week we launch into Advent; and here, today, on this last “ordinary” Sunday, we have the opportunity to explore these two prophetic texts, and try to come to some sense for what these mean for us, in the here-and-now.

Let’s look first at the gospel passage. Jesus and his disciples are in Jerusalem, in or near the temple. In the time of Jesus it would have looked something like this. A magnificent structure, lavish and grand: the whole temple area was roughly the size of six football fields; the walls were made of enormous stones, each weighing up to 100 tons; the temple itself was constructed of shining white marble and solid gold, with enormous doors made of bronze. Pilgrims would come here from all around the Roman Empire; perhaps it is some of those pilgrims whom Jesus hears marveling at “the beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God.” Jesus takes this opportunity to tell those gathered around him that “the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.” They ask when this will occur. Jesus gives a somewhat cryptic reply. A bunch of things will happen first: false Messiahs, wars, insurrections, nation rising against nation and kingdom against kingdom, earthquakes, famines, plagues, “dreadful portents and great signs from heaven;” followers of Jesus will be arrested, persecuted, handed over to synagogues and prisons, and brought before kings and governors. They will be “betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends.” Some of them will be executed.

Sounds lovely, doesn’t it? And the question that many people want to know is, *when will all these events occur?* Through the ages Christians have interpreted passages like this in one of four different broad ways: (1) these events, for the most part, *have already occurred*, during the first century, when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans about 40 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection; (2) these events are in the process of being fulfilled *right now*, in the current events of the world today; (3) these events will take place in the future, amidst a series of catastrophic events across the globe; or (4) the timing and specifics of these events is impossible for us mere mortals to figure out. The first view – that most of these events have already occurred – is not widely held, though you do find people from time to time who subscribe to that view. The second view – that these events are in the process of

being fulfilled right now – was held by most of the early Protestant Reformers, like Martin Luther and John Calvin, and is now held – in a very different way – by members of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church (which is why they publish pamphlets about biblical prophecies being fulfilled *right now*, in the unfolding of current political events). The third view – that these events will take place in the future, with cataclysmic events all across the globe – is widely held among evangelical Protestants – the ones who talk about the Rapture and the Great Tribulation. My Princeton training leaned heavily in the direction of the fourth view – that the timing and specifics of these events is impossible for us to figure out, and it's more important to focus on being faithful now than to worry about the details of what is to come. In retrospect I wish we had spent more time discussing the second and third views, given how incredibly common they are in Christianity today. I sometimes feel like I was ill-equipped to engage in theological conversation with Christians who hold strongly to those views. The bottom line is that there is not one definitive Christian interpretation of passages like this one. Oh, sure, there are lots of people who think that their view is *right*, and it often can lead to some heated debates; I've heard of times when passionate debates about these issues have caused denominations to split apart. In our mainline Protestant world we tend to find other things to argue about!

So, on the one hand, we have this Matthew passage, full of doom and gloom, filled with vague references to apocalyptic events that most Christians would say have not happened yet.

Then, there's the passage from Isaiah. "I am about to create new heavens and a new earth," says God, through the prophet; "be glad and rejoice ... I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as delight.... No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress." People will live long and healthy lives; everyone shall have a place to live and food to eat; nobody is going to take away what belongs to them. Isaiah is envisioning a period of peace, stability, joy – a new Eden, if you will. This passage was probably composed after the Jewish exiles were allowed to return to their homeland. Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Babylonians in the 6th century BC; many of the Jews were taken to Babylon and lived there for the next 70 years; then, when the Babylonian Empire fell, they were allowed to return home. They rebuilt Jerusalem; they rebuilt the temple; they tried to restore Jerusalem to its former glory. Most of what Isaiah says makes perfect sense in that context: "I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy" ... "they shall not build and another inhabit" ... "be glad and rejoice!"

But what, then, do these words mean: "I am about to create new heavens and a new earth"? *That* line certainly doesn't have anything to do with Jews returning home and rebuilding Jerusalem. Or what about this line, at the end of the passage: "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; and the serpent – its food shall be dust!" All three of those scenarios are completely unnatural. Wolves *eat* lambs – they don't eat *with* lambs. Lions are carnivores; they don't eat straw. Snakes eat insects, rodents, birds, eggs, fish, frogs, and other small animals – they definitely don't eat dust. When the Jews returned to Jerusalem after the exile, that didn't change these animals' diets in any way! So Isaiah was envisioning here something *more* than just the restoration of Jerusalem after the exile. He was envisioning "new heavens" and "a new earth"; he was envisioning a future in which "they shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain." "Holy mountain" might refer to Mount Zion, the most important hill in Jerusalem ... or could this be a reference for something yet to come? If God is going to create "a new earth," could Isaiah be referring to the geography of that future world?

I'm sure that some of those who hold strongly to the second or third views that I was describing a few minutes ago would have some things to say on these verses too. I'm sure many of them could tell you precisely – in their view – how these verses fit into the larger whole of the various apocalyptic events that are coming, either in the near or distant future. As for me – well, I'd prefer to proceed with caution. Is Isaiah saying that there is *literally* going to come a time when carnivores are going to turn into herbivores? Maybe, but I'm inclined to think that, if that will occur, it will come about in a time and manner of God's choosing, and I'm not willing to hazard any guesses as to when that will be. And whether it happens here, on *this* earth, or on an earth that is yet to be, I'm not in a position to say.

What I do know is that when I look at this passage, I see a clear connection to the vision described near the end of the book of Revelation: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God." (Revelation 21:1-2) I read those verses at many memorial services. They are a reminder of the promised hope that we Christians all share, that there will come a day when all the forces that are opposed to God will be eradicated, when evil and death and disease will all be eradicated; when creation will be restored to its full glory, like the way it was designed to be. The Christian story is fundamentally a story filled with *hope*, profound hope, built on the conviction that this world as it exists today is *not* the world as God intends it to be, and that God *will* – in his own good time – *do something about it*. "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again" – that's not just something we *say*; that's a promise that we *hold on to*, for dear life. This world, as it exists today – what a *mess*! The *new* world that God will create – what a *blessing*. What a glorious *restoration* of a creation that has gone wildly astray.

Perhaps the piece here in Isaiah's words that give me the most hope is that final sentence: "They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain." What if "holy mountain" is not just a reference to Mount Zion in Jerusalem? What if it is intended to represent God's new creation? What if Isaiah is presenting here a description of what life will be like, in that future world, when God restores all things? What if it will be a world in which animals no longer hurt and kill each other – nay, more than that, what if it will be a world in which *nobody* will hurt or kill each other? What if it means that *all wars will cease*, that all *reasons* for wars won't exist any longer? What if it means that violence of *any* type won't be found *anywhere* in that new creation – no domestic violence, no child abuse, no sexual exploitation, no beatings, no stabbings, no shootings, no murders, *no people being hurt, in any way, shape, or form, by any other people?*

Can you even *imagine* what such a world would be like?

I think Isaiah could. I think Jesus could. I think God *can*.

And I think – no, I'm *sure* – that *that's* the world that God intends to create. A world where *no one* hurts or destroys, *anywhere* on God's holy mountain. *When* that will happen ... I don't honestly know. But *that* it will happen ... of that, I have no doubt.

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