

Two Visions

Listening to the two selections from scripture this morning it seems that we have two extremely different views of the future presented to us. The one which is given by the Lord to Isaiah for the people returning from exile is meant to encourage and give hope. Isaiah's description drips with joy and delight. The picture drawn encompasses all of our hopes for the future...,this world the Lord is about to create where no weeping will be heard, no cries of distress...because no infants will die young or no elderly before their time...all shall build houses and live in them...no one shall labor in vain. Luke's account of the future comes across with more foreboding and suffering. It's a pity that we can't just focus on the idyllic from Isaiah. But when we do focus on Isaiah we often lift up the image of the wolf and the lamb, place it in the realm of the impossible...a pretty picture of a peaceable kingdom...and do nothing about making it a reality. But think about those other images from earlier in the text. No infants dying young, no elderly before their time, all having homes and living in them, none laboring in vain...or at least not without a living wage...It seems to me that if we were to enact...truly live according to the teachings given to us...given to us by Jesus and really consistently throughout all of scripture...much of that described new creation could be a reality. The future presented by Luke comes as Jesus' response to admiration of the 2nd Temple in Jerusalem. It is one of the apocalyptic texts scattered throughout our scriptures which seem to be about looming disasters. Apocalyptic texts in general have almost always been misused throughout history as a means to frighten people for one reason or another. This particular text from Luke is no exception. The metaphors and language of these texts are meant to reveal a truth, to uncover hidden meanings—they are not dire predictions of the end of the world which are how most want to interpret them. Our text this morning begins: "When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, He said, 'As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.'" Actually, by the time Luke wrote this gospel account, the 2nd Temple had already been destroyed about 15 years before. Luke's point here is more a reflection on the impermanence of the building they were admiring; on the impermanence of human achievement and glorifying it than a prediction of its destruction. Jesus' attempt to divert their attention from the building doesn't seem to work. Instead, despite he has already told them in response to previous questions about the "end times" that only the Father knows the timing of this event, the next verses show that those around him see this as their concern and seek a prediction: "They asked him, 'Teacher when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?'" And the words that follow have led many to look at world events and seeking in the things mentioned ways to conclude that indeed the "end times" are nearing. Well, to a certain extent, that is always going to be true for each day that passes, the end is probably at least one day nearer...so to speak. But there have been many cycles of nations rising against nation, and kingdom against kingdom since that first century. It is still happening all around us today. There have been many great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues. And there are still famines and plagues in the world today—despite advances in medicine and the ability to produce more food—many still go hungry and the distribution of advances to heal and restore remains very uneven. Looking to these things as predictors was not the original intent; that effort has not ever been helpful, nor will it likely ever be except for

a few who have managed to market it and to profit from that marketing. So how are we to understand what these ominous sounding verses are saying to us...for it seems that there is definitely a warning being sounded. If it isn't about what to look for as the world is about to end, then it just might be warning signs like those yellow diamond road signs posted along our highways—things meant to reveal obstacles ahead we should watch out for...things which will appear that we need to avoid in order to help us stay on the right path of discipleship. The first thing to probably keep in mind is what opened the passage—that those standing in the presence of Jesus were admiring the handiworks of Herod...the beautiful building which would not last. Too often we ignore the presence and workings of God in our midst as we concentrate on the superficial things which our marketplaces are constantly placing before us. Sometimes even those things which are advertised as being devoted and dedicated to God upon closer examinations do not always reflect what scripture tells us about our Lord, God's will and desire for God's creation. Within this same passage we are given this warning: "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and 'The time is near!' Do not go after them." It seems to me that any who claim to come in the name of the one who dwells among us cannot then deny the teachings that he gave as Jesus. No one claiming to be a follower of Christ should be able to promote hate and hostility, to encourage division among people. So we need to be careful in our listening to claims about what direction Christ would have us go in our relationships with others and how they are treated in our midst. There is also a warning here to all those who follow the teaching of Christ, that these teachings are very different from what the institutions of the world have in place—Thus the statement that "they will arrest you and persecute you, they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name." In this passage of Luke the consequences of adhering to these teachings is faced. These are statements about what occurs to those living according to the teaching of Christ. That life is radically different from what the world expects and desires and the broken world is not often kind to those who seek to alter it. Following Christ is enacting the world pictured in the opening of Luke's gospel with the reversal of the powerful and the lowly in Mary's song of praise called the Magnificat. It is Jesus' challenging of the status quo which leads him to the cross within this week in Jerusalem. But if we stick with Luke through this warning, we then get a word of hope—not cheap hope or an easy out, but resilient, tenacious hope. Hope that refuses to be defeated by the very real and destructive forces which are alive and active in our world. The vision of Isaiah reminds us of God's sure and beautiful promise, spurring us on in the midst of all that is unlovely and less than delightful in the world around us. Jesus in Luke also emboldens us to witness to God's peaceable intentions no matter how obscured by current events, personal, historic or cosmic. The new creation is coming, and the more closely we can follow the teachings of our Lord, the more glimpses of it we may see. In fact, often because of faithful witness and testimony according to Luke's gospel, Christ's disciples are often at the center of the challenge to the brokenness and thus in the midst of the suffering. Because Christ's disciples are often called to challenge the status quo of the world, this is often a challenge for us because many of us are very comfortable with our place in the status quo. As our weather has decided to turn colder, there are many whose situation is now being widely publicized on the news...because they are homeless they are seeking shelter in places they don't visit when the weather is less severe. There are shelters, but they often do not have sufficient space. Often those with no other

option for shelter will visit the emergency room, repeatedly and at great financial cost, because the hospital cannot refuse to treat anyone who comes through the door. The news article reported this in this way: "As a society we have effectively decided that people shouldn't die on the street, but it is acceptable for them to live there." This article caught my attention. It is only one of many of the issues which fall into that category of "social justice" umbrella...the issues which affect so many in our society. By God's grace, my life has been one more comfortable than afflicted, more privileged than persecuted, more secure than vulnerable. But the call of Christ is for me to care for those who are on that other side of the equation...to work to balance the scales so that all may live in that same realm together which was promised. With the warnings from Luke in mind to help us along the way and the vision given in Isaiah of the goal it seems that there is one message for us which can be summed up by 2nd Thessalonians 13: "Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right." In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.