



Day 10: Fulfill Your Promises, O God

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.

"I have a dream!" These words of Martin Luther King inspired people throughout America and the world. He had a dream about a land where black and white could live in peace as equals. The prophet in Isaiah 65 also has a dream. Is it a healing dream we should try to follow? Or is it just a "pipe dream"?

Background

The vision of the prophet in this text is quite extraordinary, a vision of a new world with no weeping, no violence, no calamity. What kind of world gave rise to this dream? Coming at the end of the book of Isaiah, which contains numerous prophecies of doom and disaster, this dream stands out like a beacon, a flash of hope.

What is the background to this high hope? The only time in Israel's past when there was a sustained period of peace and prosperity was under king Solomon. But even then, prosperity came at a price. A considerable amount of slave labor and bonded labor was used to build the temple and palace of Solomon. A few people prospered, but many were poor. When Solomon died, the kingdom broke apart.

Israel suffered at the hands of the Egyptians, the Syrians, the Babylonians, the Assyrians and the Persians. Israel was a little land that the big powers tried to control. The final humiliation came with the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, when the temple and palace built by Solomon were stripped bare. The leaders of the Israelite people were taken into exile, where they remained under alien rule. All of this happened, said prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, because Israel had broken the covenant and had been unfaithful to Yahweh. Israel was condemned by God and crushed by the world powers.

A vision of new earth and new heavens

After generations of prophets pronouncing doom, the prophet of Isaiah 65 has a dream. This prophet sees a new world coming that is greater than the reign of Solomon. Listen to his opening vision:

For I am 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 (Isa 65:17-18).

What do you think this vision means? Is it a dream worth following?

There are three parts to the opening vision: the transformation of the world, the healing of bad memories and the creation of a new Jerusalem.

The scene portrayed here is not a vision of the end of the world. The new skies and the new earth are so different, so transformed that they are like a new creation. In fact, the very term for "create" in Genesis 1:1 is used here. That we are talking about a transformed creation is evident from the verses that follow: we meet the same Jerusalem, the same vineyards, the same people who live and die there. But things have changed, radically!

If this is a vision for God's people, why does God need to transform the heavens and the earth? Because they too have suffered under the judgement of God; they too have experienced the

How would you feel listening year after year to the prophecies of doom from prophets like Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Micah? See also the study on Micah 6. What effect does this kind of preaching have on a community?

curse—famines, desolation, violence. They too need to be renewed.

The vision of a new Zion

The vision includes a new Jerusalem or, its sacred name, a new Zion. Zion is central for several reasons. Jerusalem, the holy city of God's people, had been violated, desecrated and burned. A transformed Jerusalem meant home, a place where God's people could be assured of God's presence and care, a place called "my holy mountain" (verse 25).

Jerusalem, however, was more than a city for God's people; it was also viewed as the center of earth. This concept of the sacred center is sometimes called "the navel of the earth." Zion is sacred as well as the navel of the earth, the point where life emerges, the most life-filled center from which life and God's presence radiate.

By renewing Zion, therefore, the very navel of the earth, the source of life is revitalized and all of the earth is transformed. Understandably then, Jerusalem will be created as a "joy," the joy of all the earth. In that place of joy, God will "rejoice," sing and come alive. Quite a vision!

The vision— healed memories

One feature that is often ignored by interpreters of this passage is the vision of healed memories. The former things will not be remembered or made the focus of our attention, says the prophet. After a history of sins, curses, evils and calamities, the time has come to put the past behind and to look to the future without the burden of the past.

A number of the verses that follow the opening vision of verse 17 focus on the healing of these memories, the reversal of past ills that will bring new peace and joy to life. There will be no

more weeping or cries of distress (verse 19). All the great disasters and curses that provoked cries of despair will be gone ... and no longer part of people's deep pain, their memories.

Given the crimes that humans have committed against creation—pollution, deforestation, nuclear devastation and more—should we be seeking a similar vision? For what kind of transformation of skies and earth do you yearn?

No longer will babies or young people die tragically because of the evils of the world (verse 20). Instead, people will live longer and enjoy life to the full—not just to the traditional old age of 70, but beyond 100.

All of the fields and vineyards that suffered under God's curses and judgments will be rejuvenated (verse 21). Nor will they be frustrated by having enemies come and take the fruit of their labors. All people will enjoy their work and the fruit of their labors (verse 22). They can expect that the children they bear will not be stolen or killed by their foes in some calamity (verse 23). God will bless them with a full life and heal their memories of broken and brutalized lives.

The vision—no violence

The closing image of the prophet's dream is similar to the scene depicting the coming of the Messiah in Isaiah 11:5–9. In the new world, there will be no violence. The prophet's way of emphasizing

Does your community have a way of dealing with past wrongs and evils, even those that occurred in the distant past? Do you have rites of healing of memories, of broken relationships, of broken hearts? Do you have a vision of your congregation being a means of healing the past through Christ, our healer? How does this happen?

Does your community have a location where you feel that God is present, alive, vibrant and full of joy? For the ancient people of Israel that special place was Jerusalem. Is earth the sacred site God has chosen to be the place of life and joy?

this theme is to depict animals, such as the lion and wolf, as friendly to what would naturally be their prey. The peaceful animal kingdom is a metaphor for a peaceful world.

Just as the first verse pointed to a transformation of the physical world, this scene is probably more than a metaphor. The violence that injured the physical world is to be removed. The natural world, too, is to be part of the dream, a realm free from curses and cruelty.

At Christmas this image of a world where humans and animals celebrate “peace on earth,” is sometimes present in manger scenes and elsewhere. Is Christmas our Christian version of this vision?

What kind of vision of non-violence do you think is needed for society and the rest of creation today? How did Jesus promote a similar vision?

Where is the vision?

It is both sad and ironic that Jerusalem, the place where the prophet saw this dream fulfilled, is today a place of violence. The peoples of modern Israel and Palestine have no peace, only an endless cycle of violence. And what we see through the media is only the image of violence. Is the vision of the prophet pointless?

First, it needs to be recognized that there are people in both camps working for peace. One such group, Rabbis for Peace, opposes the militant Zionist approach. Similar groups of Christians and Muslims are searching for ways to find justice and peace.

It is hard, of course, to imagine peace when surrounded by war. In March 2002 the Lutheran School in Bethlehem in Palestine was invaded and occupied by Israeli tanks. How would your children feel if their school was being trashed by tanks and soldiers? How would they feel about Jerusalem, a place from which rockets are launched?

Remarkably, the Lutheran pastor of the church and school in Bethlehem has a vision of peace and works to heal memories. When the children return to school, they are urged to focus on peace, not vengeance. Making peace with people in tanks is not easy—unless you have a vision of hope!

Norman Habel

What kind of vision of peace do you have? How would you respond if you were in Bethlehem, the home of the peace child Jesus? How can we promote a dream of healing peace and non-violence in our world today?

References

Dear, John (1990), *Our God is Non-violent. Witnesses in the Struggle for Peace and Justice* (New York: Pilgrim Press).

Gardner, Anne (2001), “Ecojustice or Anthropological Justice? A Study of the New Heavens and New Earth in Isaiah 65.17,” in Norman Habel (ed.), *The Earth Story in the Psalms and Prophets. Earth Bible Volume 4* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), pp.204-218.

Olley, John (2001) “The Wolf, the Lamb and the Little Child: Transforming the Earth Community in Isaiah,” in Norman Habel (ed.), *The Earth Story in the Psalms and Prophets. Earth Bible Volume 4* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), pp. 219-229.

Raheb, Mitri (1995), *I am a Palestinian Christian* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press).



Revelation 21:1–6

¹Then 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. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” ⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” ⁶Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

How does the New Jerusalem vision of Revelation 21 speak to your longings today?

How can we glimpse signs of God's promises coming to fulfillment in our world? Sometimes hope is difficult to see. Martin Luther King Jr. contrasted the hunger and poverty he saw in the 1960s to the New Jerusalem vision of Revelation 21:

It's alright to talk about "streets flowing with milk and honey," but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day.... It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee.... This is what we have to do. ("I've Been to the Mountaintop," April 3, 1963, Memphis, Tennessee.)

Revelation's vision of the New Jerusalem, of the radiant bridal city with golden street and pearly gate, where death and tears are no more, has given form and voice to the dreams of God's people through the ages. From Augustine's "City of God" to African American spirituals and gospel songs, Revelation's holy city inspires hope for healing and renewal.

On this closing day of the Assembly, we look to the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21 as one biblical vision for our future. The holy city coming out of heaven can furnish both critique and hope for our world's cities and communities. New Jerusalem is a vision for our life in God after we die; but it also holds promise for this world, for Jerusalem and other war-torn cities, giving a vision for "what we have to do," in the words of Dr. King.

God's promises fulfilled

Positioned at the end of the book of Revelation, at the end of our Bible, the New Jerusalem vision of Revelation 21 brings to fulfillment a chorus of God's promises—the prophet Isaiah's promise of newness ("I am about to do a new thing," Isa 43:19; and "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth," Isa 65:17); prophetic promises of a restoration of Jerusalem or a heavenly Jerusalem; and also Revelation's own promises made to the seven churches in the opening letters of Revelation 2–3.

Belief in a heavenly city of Jerusalem, often personified as a feminine figure or "mother," was widespread in biblical times (see Gal 4:26; Heb 12:26). According to biblical promises, the renewed Jerusalem would be made of precious stones (Isa 54:11–12; Tobit 13:16–17), it would have a magnificent new temple (Ezek 40–48), and it would be "married" to God in a covenant of love (Isa 54:5). Following the destruction of earthly Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE, people's longings for a renewed Jerusalem intensified. They longed for a renewal of their city, for a sense of home, for a dwelling with God.

New Jerusalem also fulfills promises introduced in the letters to the seven churches, in order to motivate people to be faithful. Revelation 2–3 promised that we would "eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God" (Rev 2:7) and be granted citizenship in the "city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven" (Rev 3:12). These promises of paradise and citizenship in New Jerusalem now come to fulfillment in the holy city in Revelation 21–22. All the promises of God culminate in this vision.

Say the name of your own town or city out loud. Now re-phrase the vision of New Jerusalem in terms of your own city's renewal: "I saw the holy city, God's New (name of your town) coming down out of heaven...". What would your "new" city look like, envisioned in light of God's vision of hope?

No more mourning, crying, or pain

The opening verses of Revelation 21 and 22 list a series of items that are “no more” in God’s new city—no more sea (Rev 21:1), no more death, mourning, weeping, or pain (Rev 21:4), nothing accursed any more (Rev 22:3), and no more night (Rev 21:25; 22:5). These contrasts underscore the newness of Jerusalem in contrast to Babylon/Rome and everything that has gone before.

The promise of the disappearance of the “sea” reflects not so much a fear or hatred of the ocean, but rather recognition that the Mediterranean Sea was the engine fueling Rome’s global maritime trade, the backbone of the imperial economy (Rev 8:9; 13:1; 18:11–17). In New Jerusalem, trade in luxury goods at the expense of the poor will come to an end.

God’s tabernacling presence (*skene*)

John now sees a magnificent holy city, coming down out of heaven. We are invited to enter and participate in New Jerusalem’s splendid architecture, its beauty, precious stones and waters. God’s city welcomes nations and peoples to enter as citizens and to “inherit” (Rev 21:7) its blessings, where God dwells in their midst.

Revelation 21 fulfills people’s longings for a dwelling with God not with a so-called “rapture” or snatching of Christians up into the air, as some modern-day apocalypticists claim, but rather with God’s descent down to earth. God will take up residence and “dwell” (Greek: *skene*, *skenoō*) with people. This Greek word for “dwelling,” repeated twice as both noun and verb, is the same word as in the Gospel of John (“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” Jn 1:14).

The promise of God’s dwelling recalls God’s “tabernacling” with Israel in the wil-

derness following the Exodus, a theme echoed by the prophets (see Ezek 37:27, “My dwelling place shall be with them; I will be their God and they shall be my people;” also Zech 2:10). There will be no temple in God’s new city (Rev 21:22), for the presence of God and the Lamb will be its temple or tabernacle.

God’s voice speaks from the throne to declare that mourning, pain and death will all come to an end in the holy city. The same quote from Isaiah 25 is used in Revelation 7:17 to promise that God will tenderly wipe away all of our tears.

In a daring contrast to the Roman economy, John describes God’s city of justice and well-being as having a gift economy. How does this vision speak to globalization and trade today?

Ecology and economy: water of life “without cost” (*dorean*)

In Revelation 21:5 God speaks directly from the throne for the first time since Revelation 1:8, declaring all things new. In one of the most magnificent promises of the entire book of Revelation, God offers the water of life to everyone who thirsts. The promise of water “without cost” (*dorean*) is reiterated in Revelation 22:17: “And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.” These verses echo the promise of Isaiah 55:1

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

God’s invitation to drink from the “springs” of the water of the water of life

How does this proclamation of God’s dwelling on earth, with us, speak to your community today? Where would God dwell in your place? What tears will God wipe away?

in New Jerusalem is healing imagery, contrasting to the deadly “springs” of water that turned to blood and became undrinkable in Revelation 16:4. Also as a healing contrast to the exploitative economy of Babylon/Rome, New Jerusalem offers water and other essentials of life to everyone “without cost.” The Greek word *dorean* (“without cost,” “without money”) underscores the promise of participation even for those who have no money.

Where is the water of life today? New Jerusalem’s promise of access to pure, living water for everyone can also offer a prophetic critique of our damage to aquifers and rivers, a reminder of the preciousness of water in the ecology of life. In some parts of Africa, people must walk long distances for clean drinking water. In Cochabamba, Bolivia, foreign-owned corporations control access to water and water is becoming unaffordable. In North America, aquifers are being depleted by irrigation and mining. In Palestine, water scarcity is exacerbated by occupation. Water wars threaten our world, raising issues of privatization, inequitable allocation of resources and international borders. The “living waters” of Revelation speak not just to spiritual or theological waters, but also to real waters.

Earthly Jerusalem

God’s vision for a new Jerusalem turns our vision also to the present-day Jerusalem. The situation in today’s *earthly* Jerusalem, closed off to most Palestinian Christians and Muslims since 1967, makes the longing for the holy city expressed in Revelation 21 especially poignant. What is God’s vision for this holy city today?

With Israel’s annexation of the entire city in 1967, Jews now have access to their holiest sites. Yet Jerusalem is holy to people of three faiths—to Jews, Christians and Muslims—and all of these people long for access to the holy city.

In the city of Jerusalem, and in every war-torn city where people search for signs of hope for a future, God’s vision of a new Jerusalem can expose injustice and nurture the promise of renewal of life in God’s *polis*.

Alpha and omega, the beginning and the end

The “Alpha and Omega” of Revelation 21:6 (see also Rev 1:8) promise that God is with us from “A to Z,” through every ending and every beginning. For first-century readers living in the seven cities, Revelation’s proclamation of an “end” referred not so much to the end of the world as to the end of Roman rule, a critique of Rome’s own claims that it would rule “forever” (slogans such as “*Roma Aeterna*”). Similarly today, in situations of oppression and injustice, Revelation’s promise of an “end” is heard as good news.

When glimpses of New Jerusalem seem most impossible, when the river of life seems all dried up, Revelation invites us to taste and see God’s promises in Word and sacrament. Revelation is framed in liturgy and song. As we await the fulfillment of God’s promises, eating and drinking at the eucharistic table transport us in some measure into God’s holy city, to taste the life-giving water flowing already from God’s throne. “Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev 22:20).

Barbara Rossing

What is the watershed in which you live? What is the water of life for which you are thirsty? How does the invitation to receive the water “without cost” speak to your local ecology and economy?