**“Utopia? No. Transformation? Yes!”**

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**Isaiah 65:17-25**

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**23rd Sunday after Pentecost – YR C**

“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.”

Have you ever been to Utopia? Utopia, KS or OH or NY or TX or IL or FL? Perhaps Utopia, New South Wales in Australia? Google says there are seven Utopia-named cities in the world, six here in the United States and one in Australia. None of the U.S. Utopias continue to thrive with perhaps the exception of Utopia, TX, which has a small tourist following.

In the decades preceding the Civil War, there was an idealism that led to some people establishing communities called Utopia. The founders wanted to create societies as close to perfect as they could.

Utopia, OH, for example, was established in 1844 by followers of a French philosopher who called for “intentional communities” based on equal sharing of resources and labor.

The people who lived in that Utopia were spiritualists who wanted a secluded area to practice their religion. The town was on the banks of the Ohio River and many of its settlers died in a flash flood in 1847 followed by most of the survivors moving away. A roadside marker placed there by the Ohio Historical Society concludes with: “Thus, the idea of a perfect society, or utopia, died.”

It seems those communities founded on the utopian philosophy, whether the name Utopia or something else was used, failed to thrive. Ironically, the one that has, Utopia, TX, wasn’t founded on the utopian philosophy; its settlers chose the name because the one they wanted – Montana, TX – was already taken.

The word utopia was coined by Sir Thomas More in 1516. More used it as the name for a fictional island society in a novel he wrote. To come up with the name of the island-Utopia-More combined two Greek words:

*topos* which means *place* or *where*

and *u* or *ou* which means *no* or *not*,

giving a literal meaning of *nowhere* or *not-place*.

As one commentator wrote, utopia “is nice to think about, but on this earth, you’re not going to find it – because wherever and whenever a human being enters a paradise, paradise is lost.”

The failure of utopian societies could cause one to look at today’s scripture from Isaiah 65 with skepticism. This prophecy describes a divine remaking of Jerusalem:

where the old problems will be no more;

where there will be no weeping or sounds of distress,

no infant deaths, no fruitless effort;

it will be place of joy where every adult will have a long and full lifespan;

the residents will not worry about being overtaken by foreign powers or being harmed by each other; wild animals will peacefully co-exist;

God will anticipate their needs, answering their prayers before they even utter them.

The audience for this prophecy was exiled Jews who had finally returned to their homeland. They were a people who had mostly turned their backs on God and followed their own way.

These words from the prophet are both words of judgment and encouragement. If the exiles are to begin anew, present behaviors and things will have to end. The prophet paints a picture of what can be if they will be the people God called them to be. It is a picture of radical transformation of the living conditions in Jerusalem which includes low infant mortality…

significant because prior to the 19th century, between 30 and 50 percent of children did not reach their fifth birthday.

The question is how can we be a part of this transformation God intends? One way is to continue, both as individuals and as a congregation, to follow the pattern of mercy Christ showed us. There are so many things we can do.

 One drink of cold water, one can of beans.

A word of encouragement or appreciation.

A moment in which another person is humanized rather than objectified.

A challenge to those structures that maintain injustice.

The naming evil that is hiding in plain sight.

The declaration that every person is a child of God.

Hope may be easier for us who live on this side of the resurrection than it was for those post-exilic Jews. God broke into the world in the person of Jesus Christ who showed us that acts of mercy…acts that are counter to the way we do things…to the way society does things…are possible.

If the previously mentioned acts we do are combined with those of other believers...single acts of serving God and serving neighbor…we will see and be a part of God’s kingdom breaking into the world today. The world doesn’t need a utopian philosophy. The world does need the transformation that will occur when we who claim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior respond to the grace God has extended to us by extending it to **all**.

One of the people who showed us what can happen when we open ourselves to God’s visions for all creation was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. His famous “I Have a Dream” speech delivered in Washington, D.C. in 1963 was fully informed about racism in America, but it was his articulation of the dream of how things should be inspired many people to work towards changing things for the better. MLK’s dream, inspired I am 110% confident by the Spirit of God, still carries power for us today. The words from Isaiah also still provide words of hope and encouragement for what can be. Both are based on transformation…the transformation of hearts and minds…the transformation of your heart and my heart…the transformation of your mind and my mind.

We believe that with the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ the reign of the Kingdom of God has begun, but it is not fully realized yet. The restoration of all creation by God is in process and God calls us to be a part of that restoration, that transformation from what is to what will be. God says through the prophet: *For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth.* May God give us the will and the way to be a part of that transformation. Amen.