

“Pie in the Sky”

November, 13, 2022

Rev. Kimberly Heath
Wall Street United Church

Isaiah 65:17-25

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.

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. 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.

They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. 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. 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.

Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear.

I heard a story about a woman who was diagnosed with a terminal illness and had been given three months to live. As she was "getting her things in order," she contacted her pastor to discuss certain aspects of her final wishes. She told him which songs she wanted sung at her funeral, what scriptures she would like read and who she would like to speak at it.

Everything was in order and the pastor was preparing to leave when the woman stopped him. "There's one more thing," she said excitedly. "What's that?" came his reply. "This is very important," the woman continued... "I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand"! The pastor stood looking at the woman, not knowing quite what to say... "That surprises you, doesn't it?" she asked. "Well, to be honest," said the pastor, "I'm puzzled by the request."

The woman explained. "In all my years of attending potluck dinners, I always remember that when the dishes of the main course were being cleared, someone would lean over and say, 'keep your fork'. It was my favourite part because I knew that something better was coming ... like velvety chocolate cake or deep-dish apple pie. Something wonderful, and with substance! So, I just want people to see me there in that casket with a fork in my hand and I want them to wonder "What's with the fork?" Then I want you to tell them: "Keep your fork ... the best is yet to come!"

This month has been a Remembrance month. We remembered those who have gone before us on All Saints Day (Wakanda Forever -- Toussain) and

on Friday we observed Remembrance Day; those who died in war. Both of these days remind us that this is not all there is to life. Someday, we won't have to worry about inflation or sickness or the U.S. midterm elections or Putin or anything else. As Christians we believe that one day Jesus will return, and heaven will truly come to earth. One day there will be no more tears.

The scripture reading in Isaiah talks about those times. One day there won't be "*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. They shall not build and another inhabit; ...for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be...*" Isaiah 65:20-25

It sounds wonderful! A life that is fulfilling, a life where people get the reward for their work, a life where there is peace —so much peace that lions won't devour prey but instead will happily eat straw! A life where the relationship between God and people is close and connected.

The only problem is that this was not remotely close to what the first listeners of this Isaiah reading were seeing around them. Just the opposite.

Isaiah is a fascinating book in the Bible. There were most likely at least three different authors and three pretty distinct sections. The first is before Judah was attacked and destroyed by the superpower Babylon. The second section was likely written in Babylon as they were living in exile, captives to the Babylonians. And the third section was likely written many years later when they had returned to Jerusalem and had started to rebuild.

While living in Babylon they had imagined what returning would be like, what life would be like as they rebuilt the city, as they rebuilt the temple, as they rebuilt their homes and replanted their crops and vineyards. They returned with high hopes, but the return was not as wonderful as they expected. In fact, as they returned and tried to rebuild, they faced times of famine and harassment from many neighbouring countries. Rebuilding was an incredibly difficult time. The reality did not remotely match the expectations.

How out of touch can a prophet be? How could this word give them comfort or hope? Is this not just 'Pie in the Sky' preaching? You've heard that expression 'Pie in the Sky'? It comes from a lyric in a song written in 1911 to mock the Salvation Army song "Sweet By and By". The expression 'pie

in the sky 'represents an empty promise. (Don't worry that you're hungry now, because by and by you'll get pie in the sky!)

“Long-haired preachers come out every night,
Try to tell you what's wrong and what's right;
But when asked how 'bout something to eat
They will answer with voices so sweet:

(CHORUS:)

You will eat, bye and bye,
In that glorious land above the sky;
Work and pray, live on hay,
You'll get pie in the sky when you die.
And the starvation army they play,
And they sing and they clap and they pray,
Till they get all your coin on the drum,
Then they tell you when you're on the bum ...
You'll get pie in the sky when you die!”

The writer of the song, Joe Hill, was critical of religion that preached about the afterlife but didn't do anything about the suffering of people in this life. The message the singer heard was a kind of 'Don't Worry be Happy' message: “It might be hard now, but don't worry about that. In fact, we should celebrate because eternity is coming!” Now truth be told, he picked on the Salvation Army; but historically and even today the Salvation Army has been a church that is not afraid to go into the streets and meet people where they are, and they've always been big on feeding the hungry. There were a lot of other churches at that time and today where that criticism would be true — but the Salvation Army is not one of them.

Over time there have always been churches who have cared more about heaven than earth, and occasionally there are churches that care more about earth than heaven.

“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.”

Those were the words God spoke through the prophet. “I am about to create ... be glad and rejoice!” This is not talking about the distant future. It is the near future. It is a future that is so close that you can taste it and even have joy now, even as you see the pain around you.

God was not saying that they should ignore the challenging and painful reality around them, or pretend it was not real. God was inviting the people

to see with the eyes of faith, and trust that God was there in the brokenness creating new life.

We tend to think that the negative emotions like grief are on the opposite pole from positive emotions like joy, and that if you want joy you have to move farther and farther away from the feelings of grief and farther and farther away from situations that are ugly and dark and difficult. And you see Christians who lean to one extreme or another.

I remember one minister out west many years ago who never liked to talk about the cross or dwell on negative things. He kept saying “We are an Easter people”. You get some churches that just want to celebrate and are all ‘happy, clappy, chappies’! On the other extreme I’ve been in church conferences in our own denomination where there is an attitude that if you show any joy, you are not taking the problems of the world seriously enough. We should instead be serious and somber, lamenting all of the injustices of the world.

It may seem like a contradiction but if you enter more fully into faith you should feel more joy, more peace — but also feel the pain of the world and the pain of your neighbour more.

Even the 12 Steps of AA understands this. After the first step of being aware of the big problem in your life — your powerlessness over whatever addiction or situation, you move towards God, towards the One who can save you. Once you surrender your will and choose to trust God completely with your life, where do the steps move you? Do they move you away from all that pain that was in your life? No — the next steps move you right back into it. The steps invite you to face the issues, to name them and then to make amends, to repair the damage done. Why? Because facing the pain with faith, facing the hurt knowing you are not alone, leads to freedom and leads to joy. It leads to a Spiritual Awakening. Where does that freedom and joy lead you? Back into the pain. But this time, the focus is on helping others with their pain.

In fact, AA discovered what scientists know now to be true — that happiness and joy cannot be found in anything outside: whether it’s alcohol, Christmas shopping, or a new car. But it is found in relationship: relationship with God and real relationships with people. When we see another suffering, do we reach out and seek to make a small difference in their life?

The joy that is offered to us through a life of faith does not separate us from pain. To be human is to experience pain and suffering. We are entering the season of reflecting on the incarnation — how God became human. God did not avoid pain. Jesus came and took on human form. He did not avoid suffering, either his own or the suffering of others, and neither was he a kill-joy. In fact, he was real joy. (You don't turn water into wine at a wedding if you're down on joy!)

Archbishop Desmond Tutu passed away almost a year ago on December 26th. He was instrumental in bringing justice, healing and peace to South Africa by authoring the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. One of the things I have learned about Tutu is that grief and joy were very present and near for him. While I know that there were times when he was angry and resentful, Tutu learned the power of forgiveness. He would be the first to say that we must not look away when there is overt racism, we should not look away when we learn of stories of Indigenous peoples from the past or present experiencing injustice. We should not look away from any hurt or injury in a neighbour or in the world. Tutu did not look away.

At the same time Tutu was a man with a twinkle in his eyes —a man with an incredibly infectious laugh; a man who experienced true joy. One of the last projects of his life was a dialogue on joy that he had with his close friend the Dalai Lama. There is a book called *The Book of Joy* and a documentary movie about it: *Mission Joy: Finding Happiness in Troubled Times*. Take a look at this movie trailer for the project:

https://youtu.be/wopEOI_j6H8 It's not the easiest to find if you want to watch it. You can rent it on iTunes and maybe other places as well.)

This is one of the things he said:

“Discovering more joy does not, I'm sorry to say, save us from the inevitability of hardship and heartbreak. In fact, we may cry more easily, but we will laugh more easily, too. Perhaps we are just more alive. Yet as we discover more joy, we can face suffering in a way that ennobles rather than embitters. We have hardship without becoming hard. We have heartbreak without being broken.”

One day there will be no pain, no fear, no death.

Thanks be to God!