

As A Joy, As A Delight

Isaiah 65:17-25

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.

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 100 years will be considered a youth,
and one who falls short of a 100 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.

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.

“As A Joy, As A Delight”

Isaiah 65:17-25

November 16, 2025

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I.

As painful as last week’s sermon on the prophet Haggai was (for both the listener and the proclaimer) it was pain with the purpose of helping us to arrive at a deeper understanding of this week’s passage from Isaiah as we stand here on the cusp of the Advent Season and begin to prepare ourselves for the arrival of the Christ child who will usher in a new world. One which is far beyond our wildest wonders and most intense imaginings.

God speaks through the prophet Isaiah and says: *“For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.”* How cool is that!?!

To those languishing for a generation in Babylon, this promised vision of a post-exilic return to their homeland where joy and delight would abound and long lives enjoyed from within the safety of their own homes and vineyards, and even the wolf and lamb would lie down with one another was very welcome news indeed.

II.

Unfortunately, Isaiah’s promise of a new heaven and a new earth was far easier to proffer than deliver; something to which Haggai and his generation could well attest. We recall from last week’s sermon that the first order of business upon their return to the homeland was to rebuild the temple. 37 years into the process, however, they had only managed to merely lay its foundation. Turns out that before any measure of splendor or prosperity was to be found, there first had to be a lot of good, old-fashioned toil and struggle. So get to work, says God, for I am with you.

In a world where the internet and TV bring us a constant barrage of the next shiny new thing to chase and with which we might distract ourselves, few in these age seem to appreciate the work which will *necessarily* be required to *arrive* at that new heaven and new earth God has promised and which God will most certainly deliver....eventually. One of the great missteps of the modern church is in proclaiming the wonder without also proclaiming the work.

III.

As you might imagine, I have preached this text a fair number of times over these last three decades. In the past I would have energetically proclaimed the promise of the new thing God is doing and been satisfied to leave it at that and let all of you figure it out for yourselves. However, now that I am what might be termed a “mature preacher” such an easy out is no longer permissible or prudent. Nor should it be, if we are being honest. After 30 years one *should* be able to deliver a more poignant message from such a text. One which is necessarily more nuanced as well.

As is the case today, this particular passage from Isaiah 65:17-25 is often utilized to bring to bear a promise to those who await the ushering-in of hope in either surviving their current sojourn or trial, and/or in awaiting the establishment of the Kingdom of God heralded by the Messiah. Today, however, I would ask you to consider that this passage is less a promise for the future and more an effort to sooth us in our present.

IV.

As I mentioned last Sunday, this past week Linda and I “snuck off” to Maine for a quick visit with the grandson before winter really sets and young Alistair gets any bigger than he already is. So much for our best laid plans as we departed in snow and freezing rain, and the lad is already a load (23 pounds at 9 months old). We made the 9 hour drive and arrived in time for dinner Monday night. After sharing a lovely meal, Alistair was whisked off to his nightly bath necessitated by the recent introduction of solid food. Meaning he gets his food *everywhere*. On himself, his surroundings, and on those around him if they aren’t careful.

Which, of course, is a delight, and just fine with Lala and Pappy as we were pleased as punch to get back to the hotel and crash. The next day, Veterans Day, was our only full day with them and a day off for Nicole. Linda went over for breakfast and some mother / daughter / grandkid time while I stayed at the hotel and worked. We met up late morning to so some shopping, then Chris and Nicole treated us to a terrific feast of take-out Lebanese food. Afterward, we all went our separate ways. Chris returned to work, I went back to the hotel to snooze then work, and Linda stayed with Nicole and Alistair.

V.

However, the story within the story is that the night prior was a bit rough, so Alistair and his parents had been awake since 4:30 in the morning. He really needed an afternoon nap and, frankly, Nicole really needed him to take one. All of this is to give you the context for what happened next, which is my purpose in relating these events to you.

Aware that I am sometimes prone to hyperbolize, I am going to endeavor to adhere to the facts. At 4 p.m. I received a text from Linda saying:

Aly is finally sleeping. Nicole did the dinner prep ahead of time so we're planning on having fish tacos at 5:45. She nixed the rice though since it was a filling lunch. Could you be here in 15 minutes? She is hoping to take me to a consignment shop that closes at 5. You'd get time with Aly who may or may not be sleeping then.

VI.

I texted back saying, "Sure, I'm on my way." As I dressed and hurried out of the hotel I admit to feeling a little surprised that Nicole, as a justifiably cautious first-time parent, had enough confidence in her own father that she believed him capable of caring for her treasured child. (Nice.) While her trust gave me a kind of warm feeling, intellectually I surmised that Aly had finally fallen asleep and all I had to do was sit in the same house with him or, at most, play with him for a little while having been freshly diapered after waking from his nap and in fine form. (Not even close.)

Upon arriving at their home I backed the car in the driveway and left the engine running with the heat on. I entered the house and Linda directed me upstairs. On the way I heard Alistair crying. It was at this point that I began to get a rather nagging and unpleasant sensation. However, events were unfolding too quickly for me to fully ascertain what was transpiring (or what had been *conspired* against me by my wife and daughter). I walked into the nursery, which was like a sensory deprivation chamber save for the warm glow of the Himalayan salt lamp and the, by now, screaming child. (Wait a minute.). Before I could utter a word, or even allow my eyes to adjust to the darkness, Nicole put Aly in my arms and simply said, "Thanks." (That's it..."Thanks.") Then, she swiftly walked out of the room and unceremoniously closed the door behind her as she went.

VII.

It was at this point that Alistair got *really* upset. Not only was he overtired, cranky, and irritable, the center of his universe had just disappeared in an object impermanence kind of way. He did not hesitate to share his feelings and began to *howl* his disapproval.

Mercifully, my long dormant instincts kicked in. Remember, I raised three kids of my own. I started to do the “baby shimmy shake” which requires one to both sway and bounce the baby at the same time. As I endeavored to find my groove (to no avail) I heard Linda and Nicole leave the building, get in the car, and drive off. At this junction I had to tip my hat to Linda and Nicole. They had just “played” me like a fiddle. Consignment shop my foot, they were probably off somewhere having a glass of wine and a good laugh.

VIII.

Resigned to my fate, I stood there in the middle of a darkened room, held my grandson, and just *let him* scream. If it was a test of wills he wanted I was just the guy. Tough is my middle name. Anyone who knows me understands this to be true. I mean, how long could he keep up this level of discontentment?

Turns out, an *astoundingly* long time. Right about then the enormity of the situation began to dawn on me. Or, to be more accurate, the enormity of this baby began to weigh on me. And in *this* corner, weighing in at a *whopping* 23 pounds, Alistair the GIANT. Now, I will grant you that 23 pounds does not *sound* like a awful lot. However, when that 23 pounds is hot, sweaty, squirmy, screaming in your ear, and starts pulling on your beard it turns out to be quite the load. Feeling the tide turning against me I felt my way in the dark over to the rocking chair, and Alistair and I we sat ourselves down for the long haul.

IX.

After 10 minutes of standing and swaying and 15 minutes of sitting and rocking I finally realized that I had been matching Alistair’s intensity in screaming with my own intensity of, at first, patting his back and then, later, rubbing his back in a circular motion. Which, of course, just kept stirring his pot.

Then, in the midst of all this fuss, a wonderful memory was visited upon me. I recalled something my grandmother, Adele, would do to me. She would place her hand softly on my back (when I was young) or on my arm (when I was older) and gently move it a short distance, then pick it up and slowly repeat the motion over and over. I started to do this upon Alistair's back and, miracle of miracles, the little guy finally fell asleep right there in my arms.

As I rocked my grandchild I had the thought that surely God's words spoken through the prophet Isaiah in today's scripture reading were meant less as a proud proclamation or prophecy and more as a soothing and quieting balm upon the riled and restless spirits of those who could find no peace in their exile.

X.

As we move ourselves toward the season of Advent and the new thing that God is doing to usher in a new heaven and a new earth through the birth of a child born in a stable and laid in a manger so long ago, let us remember that such a wonder requires a great deal of work. That God has sent a savior to our world is less like opening presents on Christmas morning which have been magically provided, and more like the labor of soothing a restless spirit which has grown overtired, irritable, and cranky. We are unable to recognize that what would be best for us is simply stop and rest from our labors such that we might allow the Good News of redemption, wholeness, and healing the cross provides to restore us in the same way a good nap restores a child. So often it is the case that we get too bound up in our own human drama, needs, and machinations to accept the grace that God so freely offers to us such that life, and living, might be as a joy, and as a delight in the way it was always intended to be.

XI.

After what seemed an eternity but what must have been only 40 minutes, I heard the car pull into the driveway, the door open, and the sounds of movement downstairs in the kitchen. I was about to declare victory in my tot tending challenge when, as the minutes continued to tick by, I had the hard realization that no one was coming up the stairs. There would be no immediate rescue. Apparently, as Linda would later tell me, Nicole decided she needed just five more minutes to herself. Which, as the mother of a young baby, she most certainly earned and deserved.

All of which was just fine with me. I was glad for a few more moments with this grandchild of ours who, big as he was, would never be this small again. I would rejoice forever in such a moment at what Nicole and Chris had created. For this child is like all children, a joy to their parents and a delight to the people who are blessed to have them in their lives. Just as we are blessed to have so many children in the life of our church to whom we might provide these Bibles. Maybe it be a soothing balm to each of them all of their lives. Amen.