

Good soggy, dark morning from a hill in Rockport....

*“The important question to ask is not, ‘What do you believe?’ but ‘What difference does it make that you believe?’
Does the world come nearer to the dream of God because of what you believe?”*

Verna J. Dozier, 20th century

I placed this quote from Dozier, who was an African American Episcopal lay theologian (1917-2006), in the bulletins for this morning. It seems somehow appropriate that these words rise to the surface of my thinking right after our national and state elections earlier this week. What do we believe? Do our beliefs build up the people of God, and also the people who don't believe in any concept of God? Do our beliefs build up the people with whom we neither agree politically or with their religious beliefs and understandings about faith? We are a hodgepodge, aren't we – a jumble, mishmash, and patchwork (iPhone Dictionary) of people who will never all be on the same page – belief wise, politically, socially.

Perhaps we would do well to simply accept that notion and forget being annoyed with those who don't believe as we do, and trying to get “the other guy” to believe as we do. Can we let it go? I speak in my sermon this morning about “holy amnesia.” I wish I'd come up with that term, but I didn't. There are some things, some ideas, some situations we simply need to get over and move on. Some things need to *not* be remembered.... forever.... “Holy amnesia” could serve us well in these coming days and years as we work to sort out our beliefs in this hodgepodge world of conflicting groups and diverse ideas. “What difference does it make that you (I) believe?” Maybe if I can focus more on *that* question and not so much on what I don't like about what the other guy believes, I could be a part of the answer to our problems rather than a stumbling block to solving them.... How about you?

I hope to see some of you in church this morning. Don't let a little rain keep you home! I'll attempt, once again, to get my sermon out via Facebook this afternoon or evening on both my Facebook page – freerangepastor, and the church's Facebook page. May the cyberspace gods be with me later today....

Blessings to each one this soggy morn.... Susan

**“For I am about to create...”
A Sermon for the Federated Church in Thomaston
Thomaston, Maine**

Sunday, November 13, 2022

Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet

Scripture: Isaiah 65:17, 19, 24-25 and Luke 21:6, 8, 14-15, 17-19

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth, the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind....

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....

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. **Isaiah 65:17, 19, 24-25**

“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....

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....

So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict....

You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.” **Luke 21:6, 8, 14-15, 17-19**

Will you pray with me. Creator and creating God, help us to not get stuck in old ways, old hurts, old regrets this day. Turn us to new ways, new healing, new thanksgiving for opportunities that spring out of old and former difficulties. Amen.

Here’s the question for the day – what do you think the future holds? That sounds like a loaded question for sure, doesn’t it? But I mean it. I want you to think about how you would answer the question – what do you think the future holds for us? I’m not asking you to try to predict the future so much as I’m asking you to think about where we’re going, in this country, and around the world – where we’re going and what our roll, yours and mine, is as we go forward.

Our Scripture passage from third Isaiah this morning comes at the end of the whole book of Isaiah in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. It is especially important to understand the context in which these words were written, as we discussed last week, in order to make any truly helpful sense out of them for our time.

The Israelites had been released from captivity and had returned to Judah. This release and return took place some five to six hundred years before Jesus was born. “The homeland the Israelites had left behind seventy years before had a Temple in ruins and a tattered economy. Those who worked to rebuild

during the years of drought and times of conflict struggled to maintain a vision of what they were doing. Many yearned to return to former things – either the comfort of Babylon or the clarity of their grandparents’ ideals of nationhood.

Isaiah preaches a new vision. Former things will not compare to the glory of God’s transformed and transforming world. The prophet Isaiah says God’s intention is the restoration of all of creation – long life, peaceful harvests, and cities that never know invasion. Sounds like a dream, doesn’t it?

In this world as God intends it to be there will be no hurt or destruction. Old enemies will find a way to co-exist and all that is harmful will be removed. Colored with the extravagance of a dream, this vision nevertheless is grounded in the reality of a broken world and holds up the promise of a world made whole. The vision’s purpose is to transform those who see it into those who faithfully work to make it real.”^[1] Sounds like a viable challenge to me!

Are we there yet? With all that we’ve just been through in our country of late, I’d say we have a long way to go before “the wolf and the lamb shall feed together.” Meanspiritedness and disrespect and words of refusal to work together cooperatively to help make the world a safer, saner place in which to live still have the upper hand in too many situations in our country and in our world. What are we to do right here in this church, in this community, to work with God to create a new Jerusalem, a new world in which all might prosper and grow and live together peaceably?

It’s easy to be cynical some days. It’s easy to be discouraged and doubtful about there ever truly being peace and good will around the world. It’s easy to resign ourselves to the way things are right now, with division of ideas, politics and social norms still a major stumbling block to peaceful coexistence with our neighbors. It’s much more difficult, and challenging, to be faithful to God’s vision of how things will be.

Without a vision, we are a people without hope

Without a vision, we are a people without a future, for we will be forever stuck in the present and wishing for the past, as the Israelites “yearned to return to former things – either the comfort of Babylon or the clarity of their grandparents’ ideals about nationhood.”^[2]

Without a vision, we are a people without faith.

Without a vision, we are a people without God.

It seems to me, in spite of all the odds against us from many directions, we cannot afford to lose sight of the image of the wolf and the lamb sitting down

together to eat. We must not lose sight of God's holy mountain, where no one, no one, will be hurt or destroyed.

If we lose that vision, if we lose that hope, we blind ourselves to any possibility of seeing a new creation, as God, through the prophet Isaiah's telling, would have us envision it. What holds us back, it seems to me, is our failure to embrace a concept I learned about in my commentary reading for this sermon -- "holy amnesia."

The commentary author wrote, "A newly ordained person was troubled by her occasional forgetfulness of the issues that parishioners brought to her. She could not remember the congregational quarrels and gossip that people described to her, nor did she remember the specific content of some heartrending pastoral sessions and confessions. An experienced pastor suggested to her that perhaps some forgetfulness is a gift from God. Perhaps there is such a thing as 'holy amnesia.'

Isaiah offers holy amnesia as a gift from God. Perhaps some memories are best lost, so that people can begin anew. Perhaps possibilities of intentional, prayerful forgetting are the kind of creative stuff from which God's gifts of healing and forgiveness can emerge.... Jerusalem stands in for all human communities everywhere, even – maybe especially – in those communities of people who have turned away from God, who have turned away from love of neighbor, who deny or forget God's justice is for everyone, not just the members of one political party, or one social class, or one religious tradition, or one country.

Yet there is a tension – a "tension between God's infinite capacity to create newness and the finite consequences of human sin and brokenness. Isaiah is writing to a community that has turned away from God and for whom the consequences of unfaithfulness are real, even unto exile. Yet even the deserved consequences of exile and ruin for the city are finally going to be swept up in the holy surge toward joy for Godself and for the people of God. In spite of Israel's unfaithfulness, Isaiah declares that God will rejoice and delight in God's people and in the holy and ruined city. Human sin is no match for God's joy."^[3]

Our text from Luke for today offers a somewhat different picture of what will happen before the promises of God are fulfilled. Jesus says, "But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons.... This will give you an opportunity to testify." (Lk 21:12-13)

But foretelling destruction and death isn't Jesus' goal. Reminding followers of God's constant care and wisdom is the bottom line. Bad things happen. Evil does exist. People will die. But God is constant. God creates. God comforts. God waits. God gives a vision we must not forget – "the wolf and the lamb shall feed together" on God's holy mountain. (Is 65:25) And Jesus extends the vision to include us – his followers – "By your endurance you will gain your souls." (Lk 21:19)

The challenge for us is twofold – being willing to believe in the creative and creating promises of God and being willing to engage in some "holy amnesia"? I began with our question for the day – what do you think the future holds? Where are we going and what is our roll – yours and mine – in all of that? May we endure and look forward rather than backward to find God's new heaven and new earth in the days to come.

Let the people say, "Amen."

Federated Church in Thomaston
United Church of Christ United Methodist Church
All Are Welcome
Sunday, November 13, 2022

Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet, Pastor Alice Billheimer, Organist/ Choir Director
Lector: Sandra Caron

Please be respectfully silent once our worship service has begun.
An asterisk () indicates where you are invited to stand.*
Bold print indicates that the people speak these responses & prayers.

GATHERING FOR WORSHIP

Welcome and Announcements

Prelude

Call to Worship

One: Loving and mighty Creator, speak your word into our weary world and make all things new.

Many: **Guide us to live into the vision of your infinite realm of peace and justice, so that all your creatures may live in the harmony you intend.**

All: **Let us worship the creative God who invites each of us to newness this day. Amen.**

***Opening Hymn** “Praise to the Living God” #473 Red Hymnal

Responsive Reading “Prayer for Fortitude” (see insert)

A Moment of Silence *for our veterans in honor of Veterans Day*

SERVICE OF THE WORD

Scripture Reading Isaiah 65:17, 19, 24-25 & Luke 21:6, 8, 14-15, 17-19

***Gloria Patri**

Message “For I am about to create....” Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet

***Hymn of Meditation** “Hymn of Promise” #707 Blue Hymnal

RESPONDING IN FAITH

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns with God and Each Other

Pastoral Prayer & The Lord’s Prayer....

Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen.

Offertory

***Doxology No. 95 Blue “Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow....**

***Prayer of Dedication**

***Closing Hymn** “O Day of God, Draw Nigh” #730 Blue Hymnal

Benediction

Postlude

Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Sunday, November 20, 2022

Guest Preacher – Rev. Marti Garrison

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 46; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

“The important question to ask is not, ‘What do you believe?’ but ‘What difference does it make that you believe?’.

Does the world come nearer to the dream of God because of what you believe?"

Verna J. Dozier, 20th century

Prayer List -- Hold in your prayers all those affected by the corona virus and the families of those who have died from the virus.... And all those families affected by the use of addictive drugs and alcohol among their members.... And all those dealing with the ravages of cancer near and far..... And all those living through the aftermath of Hurricane Ian....

Please hold in your prayers all those affected by the coronavirus and the families of those who have died from the virus..And all those families affected by the use of addictive drugs among their members And all those dealing with the ravages of cancer near and far..And all those affected, which should be every one of us, by the cruel condition of racism which continues to take the lives of too many of our Black brothers and sisters..And all those who have worked tirelessly for the building and rebuilding of our nation into one people, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all And, from Jackie a request for prayers for Kyle Cloudier..and for Parker's daughter, who has had brain surgery and is home now!; Enid, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, John Flaherty, Heather Van Buskirk, and for Tiffany, Lucy's granddaughter... And for Arlene from NH..And for Rev. Wayne Sawyer, And for Amber Thomas.... And for James Armstrong and family... And Dale O'Neal (Kristen O'Neal's husband who has tonsil cancer). And Jeffrey Northgraves who is receiving treatment for lung cancer.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Sunday-11/13/22.....9:30 am: Worship
Service10:30 am: Council
Meeting
Suggested Food Pantry Donation.....Canned Soup

The flowers for the Alter this week are given by Karen Wincapaw.

Deacon for November, 2022: Sandra Caron

Note the "totals" for last week are not correctly given in the paper bulletins.... Stay tuned for next week's bulletin totals for this week and maybe last week!

[1]From *The Whole People of God Weekly Worship Resources for November 18, 2001*, p. 33.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Martha Sterne in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4, p. 293.