

November 13, 2022. Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

Let us pray. God, your Word is a gift. Thank you for blessing us with these stories of faith and failure and redemption. May we find truth in them. Holy Spirit, we know you are in this room with us today. Please help us to hear the message you have for us today that we may go out from here and help to bring about God's kingdom in our lives. Amen.

Our scripture for this morning comes from Isaiah, chapter 65 , verses 17 to 25. Listen now for the word of the lord.

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 who 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.

The word of the lord. **Thanks be to God.**

I have always loved art. I love to paint and draw and just the feeling of creating something you love.

As a kid, I would experiment and learn on my own, and then in middle school and high school I started taking art classes.

When I first learned to paint, I learned using acrylic paint. It is a bit easier to use and to learn, and they are less expensive than other types of paint. But like with anything, they are not perfect.

One drawback is that acrylic paints dry quickly. So, you have to paint quickly and if you mess up or go along painting and later realize something doesn't look right – if you don't catch it before the paint dries, then you have to paint over it in order to fix it.

There have been too many times to count that in frustration, I get halfway through a painting, don't like it, don't see any way to fix it, I just paint it all white and start again, or move on to something different.

In high school when I took a painting class, we learned to use oil paints. It was a big learning curve because oil paints are different from acrylics. You cannot use the same painting style or techniques.

And while it was hard to get over that curve and learn new techniques, there was a great benefit to oil paints. They take much longer to dry.

You have more time to change things, to fix mistakes, to go back in and add more details.

For me, it felt like it gave me more grace and flexibility while painting. One mistake and I didn't have to paint it white and start again.

Our scripture for today reads like a painting. Isaiah uses rich and vivid details to describe this new heaven and new earth God is creating.

It's almost as if you can see him painting it before you. With each stroke painting houses and vineyards, little children, the wolf, the lion, and the lamb, you can picture it all because of this detailed description, and it is all part of what Isaiah tells us God is about to create and is creating.

The book of Isaiah is set within the history of the Babylonian exile in 6th century BCE. Jerusalem was suffering from corrupt temple leadership when the Babylonians come in and conquer Judah, destroying Jerusalem and the temple. God's people are sent into exile.

But the exile doesn't last forever, and some 50 or so years later the Judeans return to Jerusalem. But coming home has not been easy. Home is likely no longer recognizable. A whole generation has been born in exile and are coming home to a place they have never been.

Their temple is still destroyed, there is still conflict. It was a time when the people continued to experience political strife and economic hardships.

So, amid all this darkness, this trauma, this struggle, they yearn for not what is, but what could be. They yearn for God to create a new heaven and a new earth, and this vision is so detailed because it addresses their real struggles, their reality.

Their present is a world where not everyone lives to old age, where infant mortality was high, where they were without homes, where they labored for food but it was taken from them – where foreign powers and some of their own corrupt leaders devoured them like wolves do a lamb.

This was the world they lived in, their present.

We certainly can sympathize with yearning for not what is, but what could be. The whole world has gone through much trauma these past few years. A global pandemic, war, and here at home further and further division.

And in a sense as the world has slowly reopened, we are emerging from the exile of lockdown, and we have also found that coming home has not been easy.

We too experience political strife and economic hardships in this return from exile. And so, what do we do? We long for God to create a new heaven and a new earth. To take mistake ridden and chaotic painting that is our present and paint it white and begin again.

But that's not what God does. Instead of starting over and creating something new and far away, God creates from the present.

God takes the world we live in and transforms it, restores it, makes it whole. This is not a vision that is only to come – it is a vision that can be here and now. “But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating!”

Even now, God is creating. Taking the mess of what we've made and transforming it with joy.

Martha Sterne writes that at the heart of the Judeo-Christian faith is this Creator who emerges even in the bleakest hour of human history to create anew. Of nothing, a clean slate, a white canvas – for that is far too easy.

No, the real power and capacity is God's ability to create out of the chaos of humanity, of a dying earth, and everything in between.

It is a radical hope to yearn not for the reality of what the present, but what it could be, and believe that God will create it. That God is creating it here and now.

It was radical and almost ridiculous for the Judeans back from exile in broken Jerusalem to see the vision of what this city could be here and now and believe that God was already transforming it in joy. That God had answered before they had even called.

To believe that nothing – no sin, no darkness, no judgement – could stand in the way of God's capacity to create anew.

What would it be like for us to follow in the Judean's footsteps – to have such radical hope that we look around us and see the vision of what it could be here and now and believe that God is already doing so?

For the Judean's this vision meant a world restored. Where the injustices of their present were addressed. People have homes, have good health and health care that allowed them to live full lives, that their labor was not taken advantage of. And those who oppressed them now coexisted with them peacefully. A world where all could prosper.

To follow in their footsteps means to look around us and see injustices that need to be addressed. Injustices that cannot exist in a world where all prosper. And to have hope that God is already working through these injustices and taking joy in transforming it.

To be created in the image of God means we can create. To become co-creators with God. To take joy in creating anew.

This means we need not sit back in desperation waiting for God to transform the world around. It means that we are called to join in on what God is already doing.

To work to right the injustices of the world. To work for access to healthcare for all that leads to long, full lives. To work for homes for all, homes that are affordable. To ensure that workers have rights and protection and living wages, so that their labor is not in vain.

To fight against greater powers that try to invade with war and steal land and homes that they did not build, steal food they did not plant

The list goes on...

As we know, today is stewardship Sunday. As we know, Stewardship is much more than just giving pledges. Stewardship is participating in this new creation.

It is the ways in which we use God's gifts of material goods, personal abilities, and time, to co-create with God. To step into God's joy.

God's capacity to create knows no bounds. This is good news.

For even when we look around us are all we see is struggle, oppression, darkness, depression, sin, and judgement. None, no one, nothing, can stand in the way of God's ability to create.

So, it's tempting to yearn for a clean slate. To take a paintbrush and cover up this canvas that is our world.

But, God, our artist – takes a different approach.

God sees our present, our covered canvas – and like oil paints that have not dried – God keeps painting. Transforming the mistakes, adding more detail, painting until heaven and earth are no longer alienated from each other. Until we are restored.

This is joy. And this joy is here and now.

And for that – thanks be to God.

Amen.