

The Apocalypse and the Holy Mountain: God's Vision for a New World

Sermon for the Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 28, Year C)

Texts: Isaiah 65:17-25 and Luke 21:5-19

November 13, 2022

Trinity Episcopal Church, Asbury Park

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*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.
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...*

*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...*

*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, 25)*

These stirring words from the Book of Isaiah imagine the world as it should be. It is a vision of a renewed and redeemed world. A world in which all live full lives in peace; in which the strong do not take away the homes and crops of the less powerful; in which even carnivorous animals coexist on a plant-based diet. This vision of the world as it should be came out of a communal experience of suffering: the people of Israel had been conquered and exiled, and finally many of them had returned. In Cyrus, the Persian ruler who defeated the Babylonians and allowed the Jewish people to return to Israel, many had seen a messianic figure. And yet, happy as they were to be back home, this long-expected messiah had not

ushered in a completely new world. Human political power always has its limits, and particularly when a people still live under the rule of a foreign empire. It is in this context of a community restored to its homeland but still lacking self-determination that Isaiah's vision of the Peaceable Kingdom arises. The holy mountain where none are hurt or destroyed, where all have their own homes, where everyone eats from the fields in which they have toiled, where everyone lives a full life, where the whole animal kingdom lives in peace. This must be how God intended the world when the divine breath spoke the Creation into being.

And yet, that is not the world in which we live. It is a beautiful world, but the beauty is scarred by so much suffering. But someday, the prophet foretells, there will be only beauty. Only life. A world of peace, justice, and love.

In today's passage from the Gospel of Luke, we read "When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus said, '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.' Jesus continues, "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven."

This passage is sometimes called the Little Apocalypse, as opposed to the bigger Apocalypse of John, also called the Book of Revelation. Both of these apocalyptic texts contain a lot of scary imagery. Wars, famines, plagues, dreadful portents. But an apocalypse is not intended to be a horror story. Indeed, the word apocalypse actually means to uncover or to reveal. When biblical authors write an apocalypse, it means that the veil between this world and the realm of God has been pulled back, and they see a vision of how God intends our world to be. When Jesus says that terrible things must take place first, for the end will not immediately follow, he does not mean that this is the end of life on earth. The Greek word translated as "the end" is *telos*, which means completion, fulfillment, or the goal. The *telos* of which Jesus speaks is not destruction, but a new world. The goal is a world of peace, justice, and love.

The Church is called to participate in God's great project of creating a world in which peace, justice, and love reign. It's a vision that seems distant at times, but at other times seems within reach. Last Sunday, All Saints Sunday, was one of those mountaintop experiences for me, when the world as it should be abided with us for a little while. What a joy it was to experience the communion of saints here at Trinity, remembering those who have passed on, while also welcoming to the household of God one of our youngest members in baptism. And further enriching the experience were the voices and smiling faces of children, singing so beautifully "I sing a song of the saints of God," and then having the chance to spend time with them during the sermon for all ages. The Adult Choir also took us to the celestial courts with their beautiful anthems and as they led us in the hymns. At the back of the church, after the final note of the final hymn, just before the dismissal, you could feel the joyful energy of the choir and the congregation buzzing.

The day before All Saints Sunday, I dropped by the Trinity volunteer day at our Saturday Soup Community meal. It was wonderful to see Trinity parishioners serving meals and sitting down to fellowship with guests. And I was also privileged to get to know several of our guests over lunch. Hearing the stories of people who have experienced difficulties in life is so important. The stories I heard last Saturday were at times both sad and inspiring. I am so grateful to have the opportunity to minister in a church that seeks to serve and be in solidarity with everyone in our community.

This ministry of sharing God's unconditional love is made possible by you: by your time, your talent, and your treasure. Together, we create the Trinity Church of this present moment, building on the legacy of the saints before us.

In the past decade, Trinity has experienced hard times. Ten years ago, we experienced dysfunction and decline as a result of a traumatic leadership conflict. The wounds from that period of our common life are mostly healed, but it has left some scarring. Following that, we had a period of relative stability, but then 2.5 years ago we slammed into the brick wall of the pandemic. But even so, we pressed onward. We reaffirmed our commitment to be a place where God's unconditional love is practiced. We expanded our community ministries, not only

serving food and providing overnight shelter but also helping people find permanent housing and providing them with social work resources. We've invited into our spaces new artistic initiatives and new community partners. In our congregational life, we revitalized the music program. We moved all our children's classrooms to the first floor, within easy reach of the sanctuary. We've restarted and repopulated committees vital to running our parish. We've begun livestreaming our worship and embraced hybrid models of digital and in-person meetings and classes. We're working toward a more intentional outreach to Spanish speakers. And we have started a serious conversation about how to make our physical campus and our worship and programs more accessible to people of different abilities

Like many churches, we might sometimes be tempted to look back on past years as our glory days, but the present and the future are bright here at Trinity Church.

The pandemic disrupted many aspects of church and civic life, but it revealed how great the need is for community. Trinity Church is a vitally needed center of community here in Asbury Park and our greater Jersey Shore region. People come here to be fed, physically and spiritually, through our social justice programs, our community concerts and art shows, our educational programs, and most importantly, our worship and our church life.

Today we have the opportunity to show our gratitude for all these ministries by sharing our pledges for 2023. In a moment, you'll be invited forward to offer your pledge of financial support. Then, we'll take those pledges and lay them on the altar, giving thanks for God for all that we have. Thank you for your faithful presence and your abundant generosity. Thank you for being part of our Trinity community. Thank you for sharing in God's vision of a new world.

Amen.