

A Vision of Justice and Peace

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
on Sunday, November 13, 2022.

Isaiah 65:17-25

Last Sunday, we looked at a passage from the prophet Haggai, who spoke God's words of encouragement to the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem from Babylon. They had been living in exile in Babylon for almost fifty years until 538 B.C., when Babylon was conquered by the Persians. Cyrus, the King of Persia, released the Jews from their Babylonian captivity. He set the Jewish exiles free and gave them permission to return to Jerusalem.

The word of the Lord came to Haggai, and he passed it on to the returned exiles: "Take courage, . . . for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts My spirit abides among you; do not fear."

They needed God's encouragement. While they were relieved to be free, relieved to be back in Judea, the home of their parents and grandparents, they also faced tremendous challenges. The returnees had to begin their lives all over again, rebuilding their family homes, reestablishing their businesses, replanting their fields.

On top of that, there were some Judeans who had not been forced into exile, who had stayed behind in Judea and Jerusalem, and they were not entirely happy about the return of the exiles. After all, it had been almost fifty years. Life in the community (what was left of it) had gone on without them. So, their return, after so many decades, caused major disruption to the social and economic fabric of the society. They were not all welcomed back with open arms.

Then there was the drought they had to contend with, which resulted in poor harvests and a poor economy. And the Temple in Jerusalem needed to be rebuilt as well. Given all these challenges, the exiles' excitement at being free and at being back in their ancestral home may well have been dampened as reality set in. It would be a real struggle to rebuild their lives.

Like Haggai, who offered the returned exiles some much-needed words of encouragement from God, the prophet Isaiah offers them God's vision for a whole new world of justice and peace. It is a vision of an imminent new creation – a new heaven and a new earth. It is a vision of a new Jerusalem, where people will live in joy and peace. It is a vision of shalom, of wholeness and health, prosperity and security, political and spiritual well-being for all of God's people.

"The former things shall not be remembered or come to mind," says Isaiah. The exiles can forget their difficult past and look forward to a promising future. Isaiah holds out hope to them for a better life.

"No more shall the sound of weeping be heard . . . or the cry of distress. No more shall there be . . . 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. . . . [God's] 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 descendents as well."

This must have been wonderful news to the returning exiles. Their parents and their grandparents had had to leave behind everything – their homes, their vineyards, their belongings – when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and forced them into exile. And now all they had built in Babylon during their time in exile had been left behind again so that they could return to Judea and Jerusalem. How they must have longed for a day when they could settle in one place and remain there without the threat of being displaced! How they must have welcomed God's promise that they would be able to enjoy the fruits of their labors! How they must have rejoiced at the prospect of an end to infant mortality and premature death!

Moreover, in this new creation, even natural born enemies will live together in peace: "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox. . . . They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord." Isaiah's vision of "the peaceable kingdom" is an idyllic vision that takes us back to God's first creation and the paradise of the Garden of Eden.

How far away we are today from God's vision of shalom! There is a great tension between the world the way it is and the world as it should be. As people of faith, we live in the midst of that tension. We long for that world which God intends, and we are painfully aware that our present world remains far from God's vision of justice and peace.

What can we do about it? Well, let's not fool ourselves into thinking that we can bring about the new world that God envisions by ourselves. That would be the height of folly. God created the heavens and the earth. Not us! And if God wishes to build a new world, God will be both architect and contractor.

But we can participate with God. Instead of working at cross purposes with God's vision, we can choose to align our thoughts and actions with God's plans for a new world. In so doing, we can be co-creators with God. We can be God's hands and feet at work in creation.

The question we must ask ourselves today is the question Audre Lorde used to ask. The self-described "Black lesbian, mother, warrior, poet" asked this question: "Are you willing to use the power you have in the service of what you say you believe?"

"Are you willing to use the power you have in the service of what you say you believe?" If we say we believe in God's vision of a new world of justice and peace, are we willing to use the power we have in the service of that vision? Are we willing to buy into God's vision with our time and with our money?

How does what we do with our time serve God's vision of shalom? Does the work we do contribute to a world of justice and peace? Are we raising our children and grandchildren to love God and to love their neighbors, to serve God and to serve their neighbors, to share what they have with those in need? Do we volunteer some of our time in service to others, furthering the work of God in the world through the church or other community organizations?

How about the way we spend our money? How do the choices we make in purchasing goods and services impact God's vision of shalom? What practices are we endorsing with our purchasing dollars? How does the company from which we buy a product or

service treat its workers? How much of the purchase price will actually go to the producer? How does the product or service affect the environment?

As consumers, we have tremendous economic power. Every dollar we spend in the global market place is a vote for the world we want to bring about. When we buy something from a particular company, we are essentially giving our financial endorsement to that company, to its product, and to its business practices. How are we using our purchasing power to further the new world that God envisions? These are important questions to ponder, particularly now that there are only 40 shopping days left until Christmas!

Fortunately, at St. Andrew we make it easy to buy into God's vision early in the holiday season with our Alternative Christmas Fair, which takes place next Sunday following worship. It's an opportunity to do some early Christmas shopping while making a positive difference in the lives of people in need. The organizations you'll be supporting—Habitat for Humanity, Albuquerque Asylum Seekers Welcome, Fathers Building Futures, Heifer International, and others, are working for God's new world of justice and peace in all kinds of ways, addressing issues such as economic self-sufficiency, housing and homelessness, child development, job training, education, and the environment.

The prophet Isaiah proclaims God's vision for a new world, a vision of shalom, of wholeness and health, prosperity and security, political and spiritual well-being for all of God's people. Next Sunday we are being offered an easy, concrete way to buy into that vision. Will we use the power we have in the service of what we say we believe? I hope our answer will be yes, not only today, but every day of our lives! Amen!