

The Shattering of the Vessels

Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19

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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. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating (Isaiah 65:17-18).

Our texts this day seem to be more prescient than usual.

On the one hand, we have an Old Testament text from Isaiah that speaks of a new creation. That speaks of a new hope. That renders the former authority obsolete and celebrates a change in the order of things that have been.

On the other hand, we have a New Testament text from Luke that speaks of a cataclysmic destruction. An apocalyptic witness to the trial that lies ahead, rife with persecution, natural calamity, famine, and death. And a call, somehow, to endure it all.

One might say that the lectionary rather incredibly divined the historic occasion of this particular election and the disparate reactions of a deeply divided people.

For on the one hand, in these very pews, we have here with us people who are indeed celebrating, along with this first portion in Isaiah, that we are on the precipice of something previously unimaginable and yet fantastically new in Mr. Trump and his leadership. And on the other hand, in these very pews, we also have a great many who are grieving, freaked the ___ out by a vision of America so strangely and sadly on the same latitude as the world's demise as foreseen in the Gospel.

What then are we to make of these things? How are we to reconcile these wide and seemingly un-agreeable differences in our texts and in each other? And can it be possible, even as God's collective and elected people, to come together and unite when we are apparently so at odds with each other's political, cultural, and environmental concerns?

Last Sunday, Cindy proclaimed: "One thing is certain: come Tuesday, either the person you greatly fear will bring us all to ruin or the person you vaguely hope will keep us from the abyss will have been elected. And another thing is certain: come next Sunday [this Sunday], the work we have to do as Christ's church in a divided, distrustful, fearful nation will be all the more critical. It is the work and the witness of a people who trust that, in life and in death, all we have and all we are belongs to God. Therefore we will not fear."

Pretty words. Inspirational to be sure.

And yet, even as they bear repeating: "we will not fear, we will not fear, we will not fear..." – today, and tomorrow, and for some time to come, there will be many here, and afar, who just can't help but be afraid; for themselves and this nation, for their families and their societies, for their friends and even for their strangers. And all with some good reason.

Now, generally and psychologically speaking, when meeting with people who are in the midst of experiencing fear, the best course of action is typically not to tell them to simply stop worrying. In my experience, that pretty much doesn't work. I try it with Anya when we're about to take off in a plane, and trust me, it never goes well. More seriously though, I don't think I (White. Man.) have any right or platform to tell someone else, especially someone who has been marginalized, how they are to feel. And yet, telling people how to feel -- *to not overreact, to stop whining and crying so much, that there is nothing at all to be afraid of, and everything will be okay* -- has seemingly been the tact of choice, at least as I've seen it on Facebook, and even somewhat shockingly in our New Testament passage.

For lest we've quickly forgotten: the disciples are just walking along with Jesus, happily walking along, when they begin to marvel at the Temple there before them – the structure that was perhaps the most reliable foundation in all of their lives. But suddenly, Jesus, of all people, points at it and says, yeah, well, that too will crumble. And then proceeds to illustrate the end-times and all of the horrors it will bring. But then! He tells them not to fret, for not even a hair on their heads will perish.

Really? Not to fret? Can you imagine what the disciples' reaction must have been to such an immediate and dark departure from their rather light and happy conversation about the pretty stones in the Temple wall? I once went to a bar with my friend, Onur, some years ago for a simple beer and burger. We sat at the bar, began to laugh and chat some, and then a new patron came in and sat down next to us and proceeded to tell us all about how that particular date was actually the anniversary of a young woman's death, who met her demise at the hands of a drunk driver as soon as she pulled out of the very parking lot space in which we had just recently pulled into. Our stunned silence and mutual unnerving is precisely how I imagine the disciple's reactions in that moment with Christ. Just brutal. But, Jesus' point (and maybe the patron's) shouldn't be lost: that the unexpected can and will happen, and that we'll simply have to be ready for it, and if possible, endure it if we ever want to see a new day and a new creation [and even, perhaps, the formation of a new, or reclaimed, political party].

Ken White, in his blog entry "Getting Back to Work the Day After" wrote: "When I look at my grandparents and the dangers and uncertainties they faced alongside their generation, I am filled with confidence in our endurance. I feel the same when I look at how America came through the hellish abattoir of the civil war. I feel it when I see how African-Americans fought through lynchings and murders and fire hoses and dog attacks and beatings along march routes and explicitly racist laws to secure some measure of legal equality and ultimately an African-American President. I feel it when I see that Americans who believed that the state has no right to regulate whom we love fought from *Bowers v. Hardwick* to *Lawrence v. Texas* in less than a generation. America has fought wars of every stripe, against ourselves and others. We've plumbed the depths of economic misery. We've survived race riots and nativist strife [and genocide]. And so we shall again. The task ahead isn't easy. It's daunting. But we're up to it."

In symmetry, on Wednesday, the Presbytery of Philadelphia's office offered this message: "People of Hope, in the midst of all that seeks to divide us as a people, we have serious and urgent work before us. We may not be sure of what this must look like, but one thing is certain, the same God who rose Christ from the dead will raise us up in our brief moment in time. We need to make it count - and we need to find a way to do it together!"

But how? It begins, I think, with these words from Pastor Amelia Beasley: "It is important to allow people space to express their feelings without fear of judgment or retaliation. Too often we refuse to engage with others in honest dialogue because we don't want to deal with conflict or we are afraid that the truth will create a permanent chasm between us. Too often conversations are shut down quickly or never begin at all because we assume the worst about those with whom we disagree. When we define the intentions and attitudes of others based on our own assumptions rather than seeing one another as people made in God's image, we are not loving our neighbors as God has intended for us to love them. Ultimately, we are complex individuals who are shaped by unique personal experiences and cultural value systems. No one can be fully understood by their social media presence or by a short conversation in the grocery line. Only authentic relationships will bring forth changed individuals and communities."

And being authentic with each other doesn't imply merely "tolerating" each other. For as Randall Stephenson, CEO of AT&T just remarked: "Tolerance is for cowards. Being tolerant requires nothing from you but to be quiet and to not make waves, holding tightly to your views and judgments, without being challenged. Do not tolerate each other. But work hard, move into uncomfortable territory, and understand each other."

Having said all that, there remains this cautionary note in the annals of our world's history. Neville Chamberlain (remember him?) once stated, "We should seek by all means in our power to avoid war, by analyzing possible causes, by trying to remove them, by discussion in a spirit of collaboration and good will." ...and I think, most of us recall how that worked out... Collaboration, good will, mutual understanding, authenticity, these are all important and inherently good things, yes. But, we also can't lose sight of our ethical identity at the cost of coming together, shaking hands and smiling for the cameras. For we must always stand fast and first by what is right, defending that which emanates from the light, and not that which arises from the dark.

In the 16th century, a school of Kaballah was formed after the teachings of Rabbi Isaac Luria. One of his most profound teachings is found in his understanding of the creation of the world, in an account known as "The Shattering of the Vessels." I find it to be most appropriate for the time now before us, an indeed this sermon, which began, you may remember, with Isaiah's new creation.

It goes somewhat like this: "At the beginning of time, God's presence filled the universe. And then, in a moment very much like the Big Bang, God's totality contracted, held there for a second, and then exploded outward in an enormous cosmological explosion. From this blast, ten holy vessels came forth, each filled with primordial light. God sent forth these

ten vessels, like a fleet of ships, each carrying its cargo of divinity. Had they all arrived intact, the universe and our world would have been perfect. But the vessels were too fragile to contain such a powerful, divine light. And so they broke open, split asunder, and all the holy sparks were scattered like sand, like seeds, like stars. Those sparks fell everywhere, many downward to Earth, though most became hidden from view. Ultimately, that is why humanity was then created — to search for, and gather up these sparks. And when enough holy sparks have been gathered, the broken vessels will be restored, and tikkun olam -- the repair of the world -- to as it was first intended, will finally be complete. Therefore it should be the aim of everyone to raise these sparks of light from wherever they are imprisoned and to elevate them to holiness by the power of their soul.”¹

My friends, it is only in authentically coming together today, on Stewardship Sunday, as joint-heirs and stewards of this often beautiful Earth, and of this God’s church, that we can press forward as Christ’s peacemakers as lights sent out into a world so shrouded in darkness, so to understand, care for, and minister to all people, thereby ushering forth God’s originally intended creation.

And though I realize that for some, it might feel like God is still stuck in that moment of contraction, and that there is simply too much darkness encircling around us, and that no matter how much of the light we attempt to uncover or raise, it would yet be too dim for anyone to see or take notice of, I beg you, I beg you, do not lose heart. Do not lose faith. For even if those in Washington, both then and now, have silenced our voices, or those of our dear friends and families, we nonetheless have this church. We have this church! And we have this distinct opportunity, through this church, to come together, now, and testify (Luke 21:13) to that which is good, to that which is right, to that which is the light.

And so on this day, like so many days to come, we have a decision to make. Who will we submit to? What will we stand up for? Well, for me, I will stand up for this church. For the beacon of light it is and for the blinding radiance it can be. I will increase my pledge, and I will pledge more of my time and my energy to fight the fight of those that need us most. For I believe that it is in this place that our voice, if nowhere else, can truly be heard. And that is through this place, and by God’s will and God’s power, that we will, in fact, be heard. That is, if we want to be heard.

For (and these next words are not my own, but they are Lillie Ferris’, daughter of Betsey Bachelor) “now that I see who we are and how much work there is to do, and there is so, so much, I have never felt more driven and fired up to be part of our change. For those of us who are just now seeing clearly, we cannot take this moment for granted. Let us not sit down and let this pass like we’ve done so many times before, but let us stand up and speak loudly all the while showing those standing next to us, our fellow Americans who feel so hated and ignored that they are important and so, so loved. Let us come together and begin to right the wrongs. Let us care for one another not just today but every day and show each other that we are supporters and fighters for not only our own rights but for the rights of others, our equals.”

For in the end -- in the very end -- we will not fear the task that lies before us. But, as Cindy proclaimed last week, we will continue to sing God’s praises, preach the gospel, teach our children of God’s love, care for one another, feed the hungry, visit the prisoner, house the homeless, take in the refugee, and harbor the vulnerable,” and to continue to stand up for what is right, until God’s glorious new creation will be seen by all, where the wolf and the lamb feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox (Isaiah 65:25).

And, so let it be.

So let it be.

¹ Window of the Soul: The Kabbalah of Rabbi Isaac Luria; and <http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/how-the-ari-created-a-myth-and-transformed-judaism>; and <http://www.breslov.org/breslov-kabbalah-the-shattering-of-the-vessels/>