

Wishful Thinking?

Isaiah 65:17-25

From the pulpit of
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
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Matt Matthews

“For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth . . . “

Much of this passage from the end of Isaiah reads like a political ad from a candidate who will do anything to win our vote.

*I am creating new heavens
and a new earth;
everything of the past
will be forgotten.
Celebrate and be glad forever!
I am creating a Jerusalem,
full of happy people . . .
there will be no more crying
or sorrow in that city . . .
everyone will live
a very long life . . .
I will answer their prayers
before they finish praying.*

And then this kicker:

*Wolves and lambs
will graze together;
lions and oxen
will feed on straw.
Snakes will eat only dirt!
They won't bite or harm anyone
on my holy mountain.*

It seems ludicrous. But we might vote for this candidate because we all so badly want these things to come to pass. We don't see this reality dawning, but

we'll follow anybody who says they see it. If you *say* you can deliver, we'll vote for you because we so badly want it.

They sound like false promises, like wishful thinking. What Republican or Democrat would dare say such things? And what voter would be so gullible as to believe it?

It is, of course, the God who is not a member of any political party who says it. And we—gullible or not—are invited to be part of this vision of this new heaven and new earth.

And Isaiah, writing to a recently-exiled people, is dead serious.

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Rev. Kat Banakis is rector of an Episcopal church in Evanston (at St. Luke's Episcopal), and she writes about this passage in *Christian Century* magazine. It doesn't feel like these words are even wildly believable. We live on an earth where global warming is getting hotter. We live in a country where the political climate is getting colder. And she lives in what she calls one of the most segregated metropolitan areas in the country—Chicago. She is right when she writes, “[Our problems] can feel intractable.”

But she points to signs of hope.

In Chicago, her congregation is working on alternatives to incarceration for people in mental health crisis, gun control, and housing. Local police are partnering in these efforts. They are making progress. The consortium of which St. Luke's is a part, the Chicago chapter of the Industrial Areas Foundation, is well on its way to building 2,000 homes on the Southwest Side of Chicago.

Problems are tough, yes. But intractable? No.

Lions aren't exactly lying down with lambs, but there are examples of world-changing communities making a positive change. Think of what this church has done in just over 170 years. Depending on how you count it, we've founded 9 churches in the area. We support ministries all over town and all over the world. Four of us leave on Thursday to celebrate with our sister church in Havana upon her 100th birthday. Look at what our ELL (English Language Learner, formerly called our ESL) program is doing to help immigrants and

visitors to our community improve their language skills; and look at the vibrant community of support they have formed. Look at DREAAM. Look at our choir. Our choir insists God is worthy of praise and they work hard, so hard to help us make a joyful noise.

I am creating a new heaven and a new earth, says the LORD through the voice of the prophet.

Last week marked the 53rd anniversary of the founding of Sesame Street. The show got its name from the famous command in The Arabian Nights, “Open, Sesame!” The show’s producers thought the word “sesame” would suggest adventure and excitement. And it has. It didn’t create a new heaven and new earth, but it did offer whole new worlds to children by providing compelling educational television for them.

Sesame Street was the brainchild of Joan Ganz Cooney. In the late 1960s, the average American preschooler was watching 27 hours of television a week, much of it confusing and violent. Cooney knew that underprivileged kids needed help before entering kindergarten. Preschoolers started learning the alphabet and how to count with the help of Jim Henson’s Muppets.

Big Bird, Oscar the Grouch, and Kermit the Frog bring a little peace, a lot of joy, and some needed learning to our nation’s children.

Contrary to what my beloved, late mother sometimes used to say, the world is not going to hell in a handbasket. Our problems are tough, yes. There’s a war raging in Ukraine. The political divide in our country is still quite deep. Problems abound, and our problems are tough. But intractable? No. God seems to have another plan for the world. He said these words to a decimated people: [You] shall build houses and inhabit them; [you] shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. [You] shall not build and another inhabit; [you] shall not plant and another eat. *Because of my grace, you will experience bounty again.*

Not only does God have a plan for this new heaven and new earth, God endeavors to use us to help build it.

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I mentioned DREAAM a moment ago.

Last Tuesday night, a boy sat alone on the concrete bench in front of our education building. He was waiting for Coach Anthony and a ride home. Wind howled through the alley. It had been an unseasonably warm day, yes, but the wind two hours after sunset was cold. I chatted with him. He said he knew he wasn't allowed to wait inside the building without a DREAAM adult with him. I asked him if he wanted to come into the parlor while the worship committee met. He might have been bored out of his mind, but he could stay warm there, and we wouldn't mind the company. He said no. He said he was fine.

But he wasn't. He wasn't fine. It was cold and he was wearing only a thin sweat shirt.

He didn't come in because I was a stranger. He, no doubt, had been taught not to speak to strangers. He hadn't seen me around. And while this church is his after-school weekday home, he'd never been in this sanctuary building before. *This stranger is inviting me into a building that looks like something out of Harry Potter or Haunted Mansion? No.*

But guess what? Next time we won't be strangers. Next time, perhaps with a much colder wind howling down that alley, he'll trust me and he'll come inside this warm church on a cold night.

We'll be building a New Heaven and a New Earth right here on the corner of Church and State streets. That's not wishful thinking, but a worthy action plan. May God help us.

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Says the LORD.

AMEN.