

**The End is New**  
Pastor Cynthia Lapp  
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Isaiah 65: 17-25  
Luke 21:5-19

I have been wrestling with these texts for two weeks, wondering what possible connection there could be between them. I decided to finally take a look at a Bible commentary so I quickly grabbed the appropriate volume, all 1,000 pages, as I ran out the door of my office on Tuesday. I lugged it to Elijah's piano lesson where I had 30 minutes to see what the expert says about this gospel text — only to discover that I was carrying the Matthew-Mark commentary and our text is from Luke.

I did some reading anyway, who doesn't love a good Bible commentary, and left all four pounds of it in the van overnight so I could return it to the office shelf in the morning.

To my surprise, when I woke up on Wednesday morning, the commentary was gone — as was the van. Both were stolen overnight. So I guess it was a good thing that I picked up the wrong commentary or I wouldn't have had the answers for today in the Luke-John volume, not that they were there to be found. Still, what will I do in two weeks when Matthew is in the lectionary?

“The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.” So said F. Scott Fitzgerald.

We here at Hyattsville Mennonite have been called an intellectual congregation. If we are first rate, as described by Fitzgerald, we should be able to hold these two different scriptures together and still function as followers of Jesus.

This gospel passage comes near the end of Jesus’ ministry, right before he celebrates the last Passover with his disciples. It must have seemed like the end for the disciples as Jesus became less concerned with story telling and healing and more involved in provoking the powers. The world was closing in on them.

The passage we heard today is only part of Jesus’ extended sermon about the end. At the end of the sermon Luke says, *Jesus taught in the Temple during the days and he spent the nights on the hill called the Mount of Olives. And all the people came to the Temple early each morning to hear him.*

It may have been terrifying to hear Jesus preach and yet they kept coming back. He was describing what the people knew — the occupation of their country by Roman soldiers, persecution and

division in their own families as they connected with this new rabbi, Jesus. Was Jesus describing even the persecution that might happen to him?

Okay, here comes a chance to hold some competing ideas in your head.

1. We hear in this passage from Luke that Jesus is describing what might happen in the future.

2. The writers of this text, writing after Jesus had died and was resurrected, were describing their own reality: the temple had been destroyed and the community was under persecution.

So on the one hand we have Jesus describing what is yet to come. On the other hand, we have the writers writing about the current reality at least 40 years after Jesus' death and reflecting their own situation. Add a third hand and you have contemporary readers, of almost every time and place, who think that this is describing their own present reality or what may soon be the reality that they would like to avoid.

For a completely different hand, and body, we turn to the vision of Isaiah. Such a contrast to the dreadful scene we hear Jesus speak of in Luke; Isaiah has a vision of peace and conflict transformed.

Isaiah paints a picture of a whole new earth and new heavens. The world we were given in Genesis — that we messed up so badly — is gone; we won't even remember there was such a thing. The new world will be what was intended all along.

We often read this vision as an isolated revelation of what is to come. But the previous verses in chapter 65 tell us why this new heaven and new earth are needed, why they will be created. God is angry at the behavior of the people, how they have pretended to be religious but treated others badly, how they *“offered incense on the mountains but reviled me on the hills.”* God says, *“Here I am, here I am” to the nation but it did not call God’s name.*

And so out of anger at a people who pretend to be holy but ignore the intent and truth behind the sacred rituals, God says that a new earth and a new heaven will be created. Once again, like with Noah, like with the exodus, like in sending Jesus, God is giving some of the people another chance. Devastation and anger are not the last word. Long life and health are what God intends. Living peaceably with all of creation, this is God's intent.

So it is not only intelligent people that can hold two seemingly opposing ideas in tension and unity — the Biblical tradition does this as well. But what does this look like in “real” life?

I have been reading a biography of the 14<sup>th</sup> century mystic, Julian of Norwich (*Julian of Norwich: A contemplative biography*, Amy Frykholm). Before I read the book, about all I remembered of Julian was her well-known phrase that has been set to music: “All shall be well, all shall be well, all manner of things shall be well.”

This is quite a statement given that Julian lived through two plagues when life around her was decidedly not well. Her town of Norwich went from a population of 30,000 to 5,000 as people died from the “pestilence.” Julian saw the local bishop crush a peasant uprising and execute Christians who understood the gospel in new ways, all in the name of loyalty to the church and government.

This context of horror, fear and death, the context of a religious world that called women to care for the sick and dying, to pray and repent yet suspected that a woman who could read and write was consorting with the devil — this was where Julian lived. With the help and care of a friar and a community of women Julian chose to risk writing down her vivid visions of Jesus. She knew this attempt to

share her visions (or “showings” as she called them) and their meanings through writing would likely be misunderstood and endanger her life. But her vision of new life, the new life that was alive in her through Jesus, was stronger than any outer threats.

Julian certainly demonstrated intelligence by Fitzgerald’s definition. She not only held opposing thoughts in her mind, she held them in her body, in her personal experience and in the way she lived her life. Julian became an anchoress, closed into a small hut, locked away in the graveyard, next to St Julian’s church. Yet it was this enclosure that opened the world to her as people came to talk and learn from her, pray with her and bring her the food she needed to survive.

While her outer world was limited to the small hut and one visit a day to the church for mass, her inner world expanded as she was given space to write the wisdom she received from God. Hers was not an active presence in the world, yet she has influenced thousands and thousands of people over the centuries.

Not drawn to locking ourselves away like Julian the mystic and contemplative, we want to fix the problems described by Jesus. John Howard Yoder says that a “majority perspective” believes that if we

just acquire enough power or wealth, or if we can organize well enough, we will be able to change or defeat the persecution, war and violence.

But, says Yoder, we are called to a “minority perspective” that looks not to power or wealth or even good work but seeks to live out the gospel, embodying Christ in the world (Childress in Christian Century, Nov 2, 2010). This will take a creative imagination and a continuing commitment to God’s vision. It will take the ability and tenacity to look beyond what the world tells us is reality and see the possibilities of a new earth and a new heaven.

I read this week of the civil rights marchers, 2,000 strong in Birmingham one Sunday in 1963. The young people walked out of worship at New Pilgrim Baptist Church and prepared to march. The police were prepared with dogs, the firefighters with their hoses, Bull Conner with the fierceness of his own reputation. “As the young people came face-to-face with the police, firefighters and Conner himself, the marchers knelt and prayed. The Rev. Charles Billups stood and shouted, ‘Turn on your water! Turn loose your dogs! We will stand here ‘til we die.’ After a few moments, Billups and the young

people walked forward, the firefighters parted and let them pass.”

(Christian Century, Nov 2, 2010, Kyle Childress)

Now these marchers were well organized and prepared, but they had no wealth, just their bodies and the truth. They had no power just the power of God and a vision for a new world. And it was as if the Red Sea parted to let them pass on through.

As Anabaptists, it is in our blood to hold these two realities — of possible destruction and hope — in tension. The pain in the world is overwhelming. Many of us know it much more intimately than we would like. And yet we hold the vision of Isaiah to be a more powerful truth; we are not content to let division and conflict, dysfunction and injustice triumph. We see that the present violence is destroying people, that it is not life giving. So we try, with the help of God, to follow in Jesus’ footsteps and create something new.

About a year ago, six of us from the congregation began meeting to talk about racism. We hold personal experience in one hand — experience that doesn’t feel quite right — and we hold Isaiah’s vision in the other. While we know that the U.S. has been called a post-racial society, we also know that racism is still very present and is seen in our still divided churches.



A year later, the group is now called “Race Matters” and has expanded to a dozen people. We are still deciding exactly how to explore our roles in seeking justice and racial equality in church and society. As a largely white group, we will need to proceed carefully, listening and watching for our own missteps along the way. As part of the power structure that we are concerned about dissecting and even dismantling, we will hold *at least* two competing ideas in our minds and hearts as we read, study, watch films and talk with one another. We invite you to join us as we envision and live into a new kind of church. We invite you to pray that we may find the creativity, courage and imagination to work together with the Spirit as our guide.

(And while you are praying, pray also for the people who stole my bible commentary. Pray that they may find more life giving value in that four pound book than in the falling-apart van, that is probably older than they are.)

It feels overwhelming; the work of justice and non-violence is so big and yet so is Isaiah’s vision big, so big that it not only envisions a new society but a new earth and a new heaven. May we all be part of embodying Christ in the world as we live into that vision.