

## **“No Place”**

Isaiah 65:17-25

What would Utopia look like to you? I asked someone that last week, and they said, “A place without elections!” I think he was only half-joking, and I suspect that many of us may feel the same. After all, Utopia, in most of our minds, is supposed to be a place of harmony, where differences do not divide, but only enrich the community. Intriguingly, though, no community whose stated aim was to be a utopia has, once started, ever survived. Not that people haven't tried to live in perfect harmony. They have.

According to Google, there are still seven communities worldwide named "Utopia," and six of them are in the United States. Actually, though, that statement is misleading. The Utopia in Kansas is now a ghost town, and the ones in Florida, New York and Illinois have been subsumed into larger communities with other names. A few people still live in what was Utopia, Ohio, but the original community that started it is now just an historical memory. The rest...well, you get the idea.

It's significant that no utopias have ever really thrived. That word "utopia" was coined by Sir Thomas More in 1516. He used it as the name of a fictional island society in a novel he published. His novel depicted a communal society where everything was shared and everyone benefitted. To name the island, More combined two Greek words, *topos*, which means "place" and *u*, which means "no" or "not," giving Utopia the literal meaning of "no-place."

Today, in keeping with More's original meaning, utopia denotes an imagined place in which everything is perfect. Most of us would probably conclude, though, that such a place or society is not achievable among humankind. The word itself, literally meaning "no-place", tells the whole story. As one commentator has said, "Abandon all hope of utopia; there are people involved."

Now, here's why I bring this up. This failure of utopian societies to survive can cause us to read our Old Testament lesson this morning, from Isaiah 65, with a jaundiced eye. This passage is a vision of God's remaking of Heaven and Earth. Here, the old problems will be no more: there will be no weeping or sounds of distress, no infant deaths, no fruitless effort. It will be a place of joy where every adult will have a long and full lifespan. The residents will not worry about threats from the outside, or from each other. Even wild animals will peacefully coexist. And God will hear everyone's prayers before they even utter them.

So, if nothing even remotely close to the vision of Isaiah has yet been fully realized, we could well ask, what's the point of even listening to this vision in the first place? Well, for two reasons. And the first reason is this: It's God's vision, and God's vision, unlike human visions, has the power to restore a community. The audience for this prophecy was the post-exile community of Jews. They had returned from captivity, to their homeland. But they found the going hard, the land in shambles, and other peoples living there who were more than eager to see them fail. This prophecy, coming as it did in what could only be judged a hopeless situation, kept hope alive. It enabled the exiles to believe that their immediate reality was not the last word. Only God would have the last word; not their enemies, not their circumstances, not even their fears. This vision made them into a community willing to be God's people, and to try again to rebuild the city of God, Jerusalem.

Of course, we know from history that this vision as stated in Isaiah was never fully realized for the returnees. Still, the prophecy continued to hold power for all who heard it, because it was pointing to the future; a future, still coming. Jesus incorporated this vision into his vision of the Kingdom of God; a kingdom that is not yet fully here, but is close at hand, and coming. This vision from Isaiah, with Jesus' call to a just, equal, and grace-filled community, is what has empowered the Church

for over 2,000 years, to seek to become that community; and, to repent whenever it has been found to fall short of the vision. So, the first reason to hear this vision is this: it is God's vision, and it has the power of God to restore a community.

But, someone could object, if God's vision is to be so long in coming, so far beyond the lifetime of any of those alive when first spoken, what's the point of looking at it now? That leads us to the other reason to hear this vision: As God's vision, it has the power to make immediate change now. I was struck by a recent BBC commentary. It referenced Sir Thomas More's little island of Utopia, and said, "The fantastical air of his invented no-place...shouldn't blind us to the very immediate purpose it served -- this was a (vision) intended to effect immediate changes in the realm of the real."

We know from references in history, as well as the Old Testament itself, that this morning's prophetic vision of Isaiah did, in fact, inspire that returning exile community to "effect immediate changes in the realm of the real." This vision, along with the preaching of other prophets like Zechariah, and Haggai, whom we heard from last week, was instrumental in restoring the sense of the Jewish community, and inspiring them to build for that promised future. This vision, incorporated by Jesus into his vision of the Kingdom coming, is what has given Christians in every age the inspiration to change their present, for that promised future.

So, what about you and me, we current seekers of Jesus' present and coming kingdom? Can this vision of Isaiah and Our Lord, move us to make changes in the realm of the real here and now? Consider this. Do you know what you're praying for every time we offer up The Lord's Prayer? That very first petition "thy kingdom come" is not talking about Heaven or some realm that comes in the afterlife. When we pray that prayer, we are actually praying that the full reign of God as Sovereign of

this world will occur now. We're praying that right here on earth all people will treat each other just as God wants us to; that changes will happen inside ourselves that will lead us to make changes around us, so that this vision will become how things really are; again, not far off, but starting now.

That's the point of looking at this vision: to see and be reminded of just what it is we are praying to happen. When, "Thy kingdom come" seems as much a no-place, as is utopia, when human nature seems too unreliable, when human greed seems too strong, and self-centeredness is endemic, when acts of "inhumanity" are part of the "human" fabric, that's when we need to have the vision of life as it ought to be held up before us. We need it so that when we ask for God's will to be done on earth just as it is in Heaven, we can see it as God would have us see it, and change things now, as God would have us change them.

Many years ago, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, started calling this vision of Christ's Kingdom, God's dream. Our own Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, has been preaching this same language for decades now as well. This vision, this reign of justice and peace, and love, is God's dream for the Earth; for all of us. Sure, there's a long way to go. But does that mean the dream should not be stated? Are we to give in to pessimism or even despair: make the best of what we can and just wait for Heaven? Certainly not! Dreaming God's dream ourselves, seeking to build now for what is coming, what will be, rightly keeps us dissatisfied with the way things are, and prods us to make things the way they ought to be. To put it in Jesus' parable language, we who follow Jesus possess the seed of the kingdom, the yeast of God's love, the treasure of the Good News, and the message that is valuable beyond all price. Dreaming God's dream, believing Jesus' vision, emboldens us, empowers us to make change here and now, in the realm of the real. And, the Kingdom of Christ comes just that much closer, in us, and around us.

Christ Church Washington Parish, is called to be an outpost of the Kingdom of God; a place where the dream of God can be dreamed, where you and I model that dream here and now; where the needs of each member are the concerns of all, where the elderly are loved and cherished and remembered, where the young are loved and safe and free to explore, where the stranger is welcomed, and the different are wanted, where God is blessed by our worship and our unceasing efforts to help others.

In a few moments, we will gather at our Lord's table, and we will pray once more, "Our Father who art in heaven...thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." See the Vision, dream the Dream; make it not "no-place," make it "this place!"