

Renewal, Not Replacement

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Isaiah 65:17–25
Luke 21:5–19

I grew up in southwest Missouri, and although my family was Presbyterian, I had many friends who attended churches of more conservative denominations. One of my dearest friends, Robin, went to a fundamentalist Baptist church, and on more than one occasion, she talked about the so-called “end times,” the end of the world as we know it, and how faithful believers would be taken up into heaven in what is referred to as the Rapture. She spoke of the signs of the end, many from the book of Revelation—plagues, calamities, supernatural events, a beast.

But while Robin talked about these things with eager anticipation, I found them—and her enthusiasm—unsettling. And at 15 years old, I didn’t know myself or my own beliefs well enough to question her or dismiss those scary images. Instead I would anxiously ask myself, *What if she’s right? What if that happens in my lifetime? Should I be looking for signs?* I wasn’t worried about whether I’d be among those taken up into heaven. I couldn’t even get that far in my imagination. I was more anxious about the turmoil that would be happening here on earth.

Well, I’m no longer 15, but I’m still relieved to read the passage from Luke that Linda read for us, where Jesus counsels us to keep our heads and not panic when we hear people talk about doomsday or when world events or even family discord threaten our every existence. He assures us to ignore those predicting doomsday, says he will be with us through all those hard times, and urges us to trust in our faith.

Plenty of people believe as Robin once did—in a literal end to this world and the transporting of true believers to a literal heaven complete with pearly gates, streets of gold, and figures in white robes. No doubt they find comfort in the idea that they’ll escape the tribulations of this life and be in a state of bliss for eternity. The temptation to escape is understandable.

Their vision of God’s kingdom is that it’s elsewhere, out there, and has nothing to do with this earth. But too often it’s accompanied by thinking that because this world is temporary, we don’t need to take care of it. If the end is coming anyway, why worry about climate change, or the war in Ukraine, or the state of our democracy? I admit that at times when I’m feeling overwhelmed by the world’s problems and worried about the future, I’ve thought, *Thank God I’m 65 already.*

But one of the things I love about the United Church of Christ is its emphasis on caring for God's creation and bringing God's beloved community to *this* realm, *this* life, rather than being so concerned with what happens and where we go after we die. As a member of the UCC, I'm called to do more than wait it out. I'm called to join with God and others to care for God's creation.

Richard Middleton is among those Bible scholars who has interpreted numerous passages from both the Old and New Testaments that present God as committed to the ongoing healing of life here on earth. According to the Reverend Patricia Tull, Middleton outlines the history of end-times belief that leads to the theology that emerged in the fourth century that "this world is not my home." You may recognize that thinking; it's a theme we sometimes hear in older church music, for example. But Middleton demonstrates that the concern for biblical writers—Luke and Isaiah among them—is not our heavenly future but our earthly now.

The emphasis on *this* life, on *this* realm, is manifested in the UCC's work for social justice, for the care of the environment, and for the alleviation of suffering, whether it's rooted in economic inequality, racism, medical debt, homo- and transphobia, or something else. I find the belief that God empowers us to be God's hands and feet in the world, that we are called to love God's creation, compelling and even exciting.

Even in the passage from Luke we just heard, with its scary images of war, famine, and earthquakes, Jesus speaks of the opportunities to live out our faith in *this* realm, by loving our enemies, offering reconciliation, telling our stories, and trusting God no matter what. He doesn't tell us to just wait it out and hope we'll get to heaven.

Meanwhile, at first glance, the beautiful and poetic description of the future from Isaiah that Linda read for us sort of sounds like other places in the Bible that describe the supposed end times and the heaven that awaits true believers. But if we take a closer look at it, we realize that it too is about *this* world that God created, *this* life. The future world portrayed here looks nothing like those popular images of pearly gates and brilliant white light. Instead, it looks like the earth we know. These are everyday images of everyday life: People are born, they build houses, they work, they plant fields and eat what they harvest, they grow old, and yes, they die.

The world described here isn't a replacement world that we don't recognize. It's familiar to us. But it's renewed, better, restored. As people of God, we aren't swept up into some other realm, leaving a ravaged earth behind. We're here, part of this re-created order, living and flourishing as God means for us to.

In fact God is inviting us to accept and embrace our responsibility to take part in the restoration and renewal of what God has created. We're not in charge of creation, but God empowers us to

imagine and act, to be part of the process of renewing God's kingdom on earth. Sometimes, I imagine God saying, "Hey, c'mon! Work with me! I need you to help me do this!"

In this culture, we're often quick to throw away and replace something that's flawed or worn out or broken, whether it's an appliance or a relationship. How often have we heard, "It ain't worth fixing." Sometimes, of course, we need to lay something down or let go of it. But in Isaiah's vision, God's not interested in destroying and then replacing what God created; rather, God loves creation so much that God wants to restore it, to make it the healthy place it was intended to be all along.

We may want to focus on what happens after this life, especially so we won't have to worry about this one anymore, and *we* may be assuming that life on earth will end and wonder what the next world will be like. But God is not giving up on this one—or on us. God is continually creating and re-creating, committed to healing us and healing the world God made. The evidence is all around us—certainly in nature, but also within us.

Think, for example, of how many of us have had painful experiences in previous churches that caused us to turn our backs on Christianity or let our faith wither. I myself have endured a couple of personal crises that led me to doubt God's very existence, never mind whether God cared for me. But through God's grace, I have found a church where my faith has been not only restored but deepened. It has been renewed.

The restored world portrayed here is a gift, given to us with joy, but as God's people we're called to share in that joy by working with and for God to make it a reality. I remember years ago Gini King, who was Centre Street's pastor for nine years, remarking how joyful the work of God can be. It's easy to lose sight of that when the work is especially hard or frustrating, but her words remind me to look for and appreciate that joy, and I love knowing that God created us and re-creates us with joy and delight. Much of my joy has been found in this faith community, working, playing, and growing alongside you all.

In this vision of a renewed world, the world as it was always meant to be, Isaiah says God knows us and answers us before we even finish speaking. From that we can draw assurance and courage to do what we are asked to do.

What exactly are we being invited to do to help make God's beautiful vision a reality? I'm convinced that individuals and small groups can make meaningful contributions to the healing and restoration of the world. If I didn't, well, my faith wouldn't mean much to me. This passage actually makes it pretty easy to identify some of the things God calls us to do. It starts with imagination and hope.

For example, imagine a world in which all children are born in good health, are welcomed and valued, and have good schools, clean water, and enough food. Imagine a world in which our elders are cherished, respected, taken care of, and have access to good medical care. Imagine a world where everyone is paid a decent wage for their work and no one is homeless. Imagine a world where neither animals nor humans are predators, but live together in peace.

That is the kind of restored world being portrayed in this passage from Isaiah. Now imagine where you might share in helping make it a reality. Maybe you feel drawn to call Joyce Getchell at We Care Baby Center here in Machias and ask what she needs to strengthen the vital work she and Ken do right here in Down East Maine. Maybe you feel drawn to offer to drive an older friend to a medical appointment, or to join a group to advocate for fair labor laws or affordable housing.

We help build God's renewed world every time we greet someone who walks through the doors of this church or joins us on Zoom. We help build it whenever we repeat the statement that everyone is welcome here, or announce that we are an Open and Affirming church. We help build it when we tell the server at the restaurant or drive-thru that we don't need a straw for our drink—a straw that, if not properly recycled, can take up to 200 years to break down and pollute our environment.

We help build it with every bag of food and every smile we give to our neighbors. We help build it when we give a book to a friend, when we speak out against injustice, when we pray for someone. We help build it when we participate with our Just Action committee in seeking peace. All these individual acts accumulate. And even if you don't believe that, you know what? The world will still be better off.

We are not to be passive but to care faithfully for our home, *this* earthly home, and to help with its renewal and restoration. God shows us the vision and gives us the power to imagine and act. Thanks be to God.