

Sermon: Are We There Yet?

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, November 13, 2022)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

For parents who have taken road trips with kids, you are undoubtedly familiar with this question: ‘Are we there yet?’ Or the equally annoying variant, ‘How long before we arrive?’ Annoying because no matter how you respond to those questions, by checking maps or the GPS, estimating time of arrival, factoring driving speed, anticipating traffic, or counting the time of making stops along the way. No matter how one responds with utmost care, or not, inevitably in a short little while, kids will come back with the same set of questions, ‘Are we there yet? Or How long before we arrive?’ Sigh!

How does one explain to kids that passage of time does not change, it does not slow down nor speed up, regardless of how often they ask the same questions? How does one explain to kids that the journey itself is as important as the destination, and that they should really learn to find productive or fun things to do while on long road trips. What do you do, when you have done all that, and the kids still come back with the same questions, ‘Are we there yet?’, ‘How long before we arrive?’

It is with that in mind, I invite you to turn our attention to this beautiful and wonderful passage of Isaiah 65:17-25, and collectively ask God: **are we there yet, how long before we arrive?**

Written during the time of post-exile, Isaiah 65 is actually God’s response to the prophet’s prayer in the proceeding chapter, “*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!*” (Isaiah 64:1)

The prophet, taking on the sins of his people, repented on behalf of the house of Israel, and pleaded with God to demonstrate God’s mighty power amongst the nations. In response, God pronounces the new heaven and the new earth that God is about to create, or is already creating.

There is considerable ambiguity as to the verbal tense of the word ‘to create’, or ‘*bara*’ in Hebrew. The actual tense used here, once in verse 17

and twice in verse 18, is the unusual Qal Participle, which is usually translated as 'creating'. A number of English translations of the Bible, such as the King James Version (KJV) and the English Standard Version (ESV), simply translate this word in the present tense, as in 'I create'. Some newer translations, such as the New International Version (NIV), the Good News Bible and the Message version, have it in the future tense, as in 'I am creating' or 'I will create'. Whereas, the New and Revised Version (NRSV) settles on a peculiar phrase that 'I am about to create'.

The point here is that the new heaven and new earth that God is creating is already starting, and is in the process that will begin shortly. This new creation is not a reality we need to wait, to hope to see in some distant future. This vision of the new creation is here already, taking shape as we speak, and what a transformation it is.

There are a number of salient points that I would like to draw your attention. First, God rejoices in this new creation and invites us into rejoicing, "*But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating, for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem and delight in my people.*" (v.18-19) It is like God is throwing a big party, and we are on the list. With arms open wide and a big grin greeting us at the entrance, God couldn't wait for us to join in this cosmic celebration. God is doing something new and couldn't wait to share it with us.

Second, this new heaven and new earth begins a wholesale transformation of the human society. Mortality is greatly extended, as "*no more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime, for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth.*" (v.20) People will live in abundance and in security, for "*they shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.*" (v.21) This is Shalom, this is peace of God not in the abstract but in the concrete. We still need to work, but no one shall ever have to labour in vain.

Third, our relationship with God greatly improves. We and our descendants are blessed by the Lord. This blessing takes on a particular form, that is should we be in any distress that needs God's attention, God's promise to us is this, "*Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear.*" (v.24) No more lament of where God is; no more agonizing of why God doesn't hear our prayers. Ask, and it shall be given

you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.
(Matthew 7:7)

Finally, this new heaven and new earth transforms not just the human society but the entire created order. There shall be no more distinction between predator and prey, as *“the wolf and the lamb shall feed together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox.”* (v.25a) Such a reality harkens back to the first creation before the Fall when all animals including humankind ate no meat, but were entirely vegetarian. (Yes, the vegans got it right!). But the serpent, the one created being that challenged God initially, will be subdued, as its food shall be dust, for *“they shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.”* (v.25b)

What a vision it is! What a utopia to be! It is a vision that finds its root in messianic prophecy of Isaiah 11:6, *“The wolf shall live with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kids; the calf and the lion will feed together, and a little child shall lead them.”* It is a vision that finds its fulfillment in the Revelation of St. John, 21:1, *“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.”*

Are we there yet? Yes, but not quite. There is still work remains for us, but we do not work in vain.

Contributing to *Feasting on the Word*, a collection of essays on lectionary readings, this is what Mary Eleanor Johns has to say about Isaiah 65: “We may not know how God means to transform the universe, but we can confess that we know it is in God’s power to do this. What remains possible for the single believer, the single congregation, is to do the work involved in such transformation by following the patterns of mercy that Christ has laid out for us.

We are able to give one drink of cold water at a time. We are able to bring comfort to the poor and the wretched, one act of mercy or change at a time. One book given, one friendship claimed, one covenant of love, one can of beans, one moment of commendation, one confession of God’s presence but for the asking, one moment in which another person is humanized rather than objectified, one challenge to the set order that maintains injustice, one declaration of the evil that is hiding in plain sight, one declaration that every person is a child of God: these acts accumulate within God’s grace.”

In essence, while God is creating the new heaven and new earth, we are co-workers, co-creators in this ongoing process. No one act of mercy is

wasted or in vain. By God's grace, all these small acts accumulate, resonate and invigorate. Patterned after the mercy of Christ that is already laid out before us, these small acts of grace testify to the truth that the journey is as important as the destination. God will bring to completion what God has already started. In a little while, with just a blink of an eye, we shall find ourselves in Shalom, in the Kingdom of God, on earth as it is in heaven.

A while back, I had devised a simple response (a brilliant one might I add) to my own kids pestering me with the question, "Are we there yet?", "How long until we arrive?" I would tell them, 'we are almost there, in about 15 minutes.' It matters not if GPS says we are still 3 1/2 hours away, my standard response would be the same: 'we are almost there, in about 15 minutes.' After a few times, they caught on to what I was doing. With some joyful banter back and forth, they would simply give up asking me the same questions, as they know that my answer would be the same: 'we are almost there, in about 15 minutes.'

I imagine God saying the same thing to us, concerning the reality of the new heaven and new earth. When we find ourselves losing strength, sharing the good news of the kingdom of God to those who do not seem to care. When we find ourselves losing patience, groaning with the creation on the prevalences of injustice seemingly all around us. When we find ourselves losing even faith, as to whether God listens to our prayer, or if God truly cares. I imagine the Lord God whispering to us gently, 'stay in there, we are almost there, in about 15 minutes'.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.