

Bible Study
Proper 28, Year C
November 13, 2016

[RCL] Isaiah 65:17-25; Canticle 9; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

Isaiah 65:17-25

In this passage, we encounter the prophet Isaiah speaking to the Jewish people who have returned from their exile in Babylon. Despite the fact that they were no longer exiled, Isaiah's audience was not particularly well off. Instead of returning to the sparkling city that was prophesied throughout the Hebrew scriptures, the Jewish people in the generations following the exile had not recovered and still lived in a dilapidated, crumbling Jerusalem, a Jerusalem that was far from what they have been expecting.

Yet the prophet Isaiah has a message of hope for the post-exilic Jews, a message that can offer us hope, too. We hear the message that the Lord God will "create new heavens and a new earth" (v. 17) and "the wolf and the lamb shall feed together" (v. 25). This message is one of restoration, of newness, and of peaceful coexistence, but it is also a radical promise of an entirely new creation. The same God who created the world and brought abundant life out of a formless void will once again create order and beauty out of disarray, confusion and trials.

- What sort of practices do you have in your spiritual life that help you feel refreshed, restored and renewed?

Canticle 9 (Isaiah 12)

In this song of praise, we once again hear the perspective of the post-exilic Jews who have been through trying times but who have also heard the promise of restoration and are still awaiting this future day of transformation. This text is a vision of what the people will say to God on the day when God's promises are fulfilled.

The line "Therefore you shall draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation" (v. 3) presents a particularly striking image. Although drawing water may be a foreign chore to us in the present day, it would have been a task all too familiar to Isaiah's original audience.

This task of drawing water, one pot or bucket at a time, would have been tedious and labor-intensive but was utterly necessary for living; water must be drawn for drinking, cooking and agriculture. This task was absolutely essential and, although perhaps difficult, had a life-giving result. Like the chore of drawing water, our relationships with God can be this way, too. Despite toil and struggles, we have the hope and promise of eternal life and salvation through relationship because, as the prophet promises, it is God who saves us.

- What are challenges in your daily life that give you the opportunity to "draw water with rejoicing"? That is, where in your life can your struggles and frustrations lead to a deeper, life-giving relationship with God?

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

It is quite easy to moralize this passage and use it to pass judgments on others, especially since it contains phrases like “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat” (v. 10). Yet, this passage also offers us an opportunity to reflect on what it means to be in community, particularly to consider the difficulties and frustrations of life in a Christian community.

How, then, should Christians treat each other? We are called by God to love our neighbors as ourselves, but what does that mean? For Paul, in communication with the Thessalonians, this means to not be idle. When we are idle, we place a burden on other people. If I don’t clean up after myself, someone else will have to. In choosing idleness, I am making a choice for myself but also a choice to burden those affected by my actions.

But idleness can also affect our relationships with God. When we are idle, we are not giving our best to God, which does a disservice both to God and to ourselves. We are shirking our calling as children of God, called into loving relationship. Instead of idleness, we must choose to be active in our relationships, with God and those around us, giving the very best of ourselves to those with whom God calls us into relationship.

- Are you idle or active in your relationship with God?
- If you are idle, what can you do to be more active? If you are active in your relationship with God, how do you sustain that relationship?

Luke 21:5-19

Throughout the gospels, we witness Jesus critiquing the temple and its authorities: This is the same temple that was cleansed by Jesus and the same temple where Jesus denounced the scribes. The corruption of the temple authorities, those who are supposed to be religious and societal leaders, is leading people away from right worship of God and must be destroyed in order to bring people into right relationship.

As this passage continues, Jesus warns his followers of the difficulties that are in store for them: arrest, persecution and betrayal. It certainly doesn’t make the path of discipleship sound appealing. Yet as difficult as this passage can be, it ends with a promise: “But not a hair on your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls” (v. 18-19).

By the time this gospel was written, the temple in Jerusalem had, in fact, been destroyed and Jesus’ words had been fulfilled. And if Jesus was right about the temple, can’t we also believe his promise that, if we follow him, not a hair on our heads will perish? In the face of corruption, Jesus is a trusted name, and by following him, we can rest in the promise of new life.

Like the temple scribes in Jesus’ time, we all have people or influences in our lives that can get in the way of our relationship with God.

- Who or what stands in the way of your relationship with God?
- In the face of trials and difficulties, how do you find God’s promise in your life?

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