**Utopia**

November 13, 2016

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

**Isaiah 65:17-25**

Isaiah 12 or Psalm 98

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Luke 21:5-19

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ccording to Google, there are only seven communities worldwide named "Utopia," and six of them are in the United States. 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 live in what was Utopia, Ohio, but the community by that name is now a historical memory. Utopia, Texas, is still there, although with a population of less than 250. The one not in the United States is in New South Wales, Australia, and it seems to be little more than a spot on the map.

It is perhaps significant that no utopias have thrived. The 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 with a long Latin title that translates On the Best State of a Republic and on the New Island of Utopia. His book depicted a communal society where everything was shared and everyone benefitted. To name the island, More combined two Greek words, topos, which means "place" or "where," andu or ou, which means "no" or "not," giving a literal meaning of "nowhere" or "not-place."

His book was a satirical criticism of the European society of his day. Among More's targets were the abuse of the royal prerogative and land enclosure practices that worked against the common good, both of which were major societal problems in 16th-century England. In More's book, they were in contrast to the uncomplicated society of the Utopians.

Today, in keeping with More's original meaning, utopia denotes an imagined place or state of things in which everything is perfect. In fact, synonyms for utopia include "paradise," "Shangri-La," "nirvana" and "heaven on earth." Most of us would conclude that such a place or society is not achievable among humankind. The etymology of the word -- literally meaning "nowhere" or "not-place" -- tells the whole story. When I was at Starbucks and asked someone if they knew where I could find “Utopia” they told me, “Utopia is nice to think about, but on this earth, you're not going to find it -- because wherever and whenever a human being enters a paradise, paradise is lost." Or, as someone else has said, "Abandon all hope of utopia -- there are people involved."

But in the decades preceding the Civil War, a certain idealism among some people led to the founding of communities called Utopia because the founders were intent on trying to create societies as close to perfect as they could. Ohio's Utopia, for example, was established in 1844 by followers of French philosopher Charles Fourier who called for "intentional communities" based on equal sharing of resources and labor. The people who came to that Utopia were spiritualists who wanted a secluded area to practice their religion. The town was on the banks of the Ohio River, and unfortunately, many of its settlers died in a flash flood in 1847. Most of the survivors moved away. There are people living in the area today, but they are not communalists and the town, as such, is relegated to a roadside marker placed by the Ohio Historical Society. After telling of the flood and the deaths, the marker includes this sentence: "Thus, the idea of the perfect society, or utopia, died."[[1]](#footnote-1)

Here's the thing: No community founded to be a true utopia, whether using that name or not, has continued to exist as such. (It's ironic that the town in Texas named Utopia is still a living community, because it's the one Utopia that wasn't founded on a utopian principle; its early residents simply chose that name because the name they really wanted -- Montana, Texas -- was already taken.)

This failure of utopian societies to survive can cause us to read Isaiah 65:17-25 with a jaundiced eye, for that passage describes a divine remaking of Jerusalem where the old problems will be no more, where 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. In this new Jerusalem, the residents will not worry about encroachment or threats from outside or from each other. Even wild animals will peacefully coexist. And God will anticipate their needs, answering their prayers before they even utter them.

The audience for this prophecy was the post-exilic community of Jews. They had returned to their homeland, but they found the going hard, the land in shambles, other people living in their ancestral homes, their neighbors resentful and their fortunes linked to a foreign power that now ruled them. So, this prophecy, if they believed it, would have kept hope alive.

But for how long? We know from history that this vision as stated in Isaiah was never realized for the returnees. The prophecy, then, if it is to still have power, must refer to a state still to come. And indeed, the New Testament speaks of the kingdom of God, which is not here yet, at least not in any fully realized way, but which is still promised to come. In that paradigm, this passage from Isaiah is an Old Testament preview of that kingdom.

If it was to be so long in coming, however, so far beyond the lifetime of any of those alive when the prophecy was spoken, why was it even given at that point?

We have no clear answer to that, but there's something about utopias that might point us in the right direction: A 2014 BBC column that referenced More's fictional island named Utopia commented, "The fantastical air of his invented non-place, with its bizarre social mores and customs, shouldn't blind us to the very immediate and polemical purpose it served -- this was a fiction intended to effect immediate changes in the realm of the real" (emphasis added).

We know from other references in the Old Testament that utopia-like prophecies to the post-exilic community did, if fact, inspire the members of that community to "effect immediate changes in the realm of the real." One of the other prophets to the post-exilic group was Zechariah, who like the prophet of Isaiah 65, cast a vision of an ideal future for the Jews (see Zechariah 8), and his preaching, along with that of fellow prophet Haggai from which we read a week ago, was instrumental in getting the returnees to finish rebuilding the temple, a project begun earlier but then stalled.

But that was then and this is now. What purpose might this utopian vision in Isaiah have for us who are readers of the Bible today?

For one thing, it should have much the same impact as does the Lord's Prayer, when we understand that the petition "thy kingdom come" is not talking about heaven or some realm that comes in the afterlife. We are praying that the full reign of God as Sovereign of this world will occur soon, so that right here on earth people will treat one another just as God wants them to, and that holy living by everyone will be a foregone conclusion.

When explained that way, the phrase, "your kingdom come" may seem as much like a pipe dream as any utopia. Human nature seems too unreliable. Human greed seems too strong. Self-centeredness seems endemic. Acts of "inhumanity" are unfortunately too much a part of the "human" fabric. Many of the same sins that people committed 4,000 years ago are still committed today, so where's the evidence that we are any closer to the goal that God's will be done on earth just as it is in heaven?

But the fact is,though we get mired in the problems, pains and sins of life as we know it, we need to have the vision of life as it ought to be held before us.

Now I want to offer us a big parenthesis here, one that takes us to why we even read this passage in the first place this morning. This is something that you know and we could give this more detail, but we will add a few bones to it.

Over the past few weeks we have been selecting Bible passages to read based on a sign purchased at a big box store. We went looking for Bible passages that addressed our theme. The overarching theme was to Love Generously, but we had different phrases like – Be Grateful, Work Hard, Enjoy Life, Keep Your Promises and Give Freely. We then went looking for Biblical texts that addressed these themes.

Sometimes pastors will preach their way through a Book of the Bible. The Book of Romans or the Book of Ephesians are a bit more popular. Each Sunday a series of verses are read from that book and explained in relationship to the context of the entire scope of the Bible.

Throughout history, the Christian Church has developed a lectionary . . . a series of Bible readings from the Old and New Testaments to be read on Sundays. It was the Jewish Talmud that claims the practice of reading appointed Scriptures on given days or occasions dates to the time of Moses and began with the annual religious festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles.

The early Christians adopted the Jewish custom of reading extracts from the Old Testament on the Sabbath. They soon added extracts from the writings of the Apostles and Evangelists. Both Hebrew and Christian lectionaries developed over the centuries. Typically, a lectionary will go through the scriptures in a logical pattern, and include selections which were chosen by the religious community for their appropriateness to particular occasions. The one-year Jewish lectionary reads the entirety of the Torah within the space of a year and may have begun in the Babylonian Jewish community; the three-year Jewish lectionary seems to trace its origin to the Jewish community in and around the Holy Land. The early Christian Church began developing a reading pattern that became well established by 452AD. Things changed a bit during the reformation and a one year lectionary became a part of the reformed movement of churches of which the Presbyterian Church became a part. These Reformed churches divided the Heidelberg Catechism into 52 weekly sections, and many churches preached or taught from a corresponding source scripture weekly. Eventually many developed their own three year reading pattern and cycle.

After the Second Vatican Council of 1962–1965, the Holy See, even before producing an actual lectionary in Latin developed an order of readings for the Sunday Mass. This order introduced an arrangement by which the readings on Sundays and on some principal feasts recur in a three-year cycle, with four passages from Scripture (including one from the Psalms) being used in each Lord’s Day.

Protestant Church watched this development closely and embraced relatively the same Bible reading schedule. So, although the lectionary can be traced in some form back to Moses, it is what happened in 1962-1965 that gave us the schedule we have today. This was revised again in 1992.

So, this Sunday, we have started back on the lectionary reading cycle and this just happens to be the Old Testament passage. The lectionary somewhat forces us to read the full breadth of the Bible and this otherwise might be a passage that is ignored. However, when the Session read it on Tuesday evening one of the elders said, “This Isaiah passage sounds like a campaign speech.” And yes, it does, doesn’t it? It holds out a Utopian view to give people hope.

One of the people who showed us the power of such Utopian visions was Martin Luther King Jr. His famous "I Have a Dream" speech delivered in Washington, D.C., in 1963 was fully informed about racism in America, but his enunciation of his dream of how things should be inspired many people to work toward changing things for the better, and it still carries that kind of power. In fact, a lot of the progress on racial issues that has been made in America owes its inspiration to that speech.

There is still a long way to go before King's dream becomes a full reality. But does that mean the dream should not be stated? Certainly not, for it rightly keeps us dissatisfied with the way things are and keeps prodding us to make things the way they ought to be.

In the same sense, the description of the kingdom of God needs to be held before us as well. And Isaiah 65 is one place where the Word holds up the dream toward which we should aspire.

We who worship God benefit from glimpsing God's intention for the future. Yes, we have a long way to go. Yes, it seems hardly possible that humankind can get there. Yes, we have lots of reasons for pessimism. But without the vision, what do we have? Make the best of things now and wait for heaven?

No, not good enough, and here's why: Jesus tells us that with his coming the kingdom is already begun; it's not fully here, but it began with his first coming. And for us who follow him, the vision of the kingdom of God elicits action in the here and now.

Writing about this text from Isaiah, biblical commentator Paul D. Hanson says, "It is simply not true that only programs outlining goals attainable on the basis of pragmatic logic are capable of moving people to action. Perhaps that is the case in movements that exclude a spiritual dimension, where the warning not to aim too high is in order, lest failure to reach the goal translate into a sense of defeat."[[2]](#footnote-2)

But, Hanson adds, "For those whose identity is grounded in God's sovereignty the case is very different. No goal short of the restoration of all God's creation to its intended wholeness will satisfy the yearning of the Servant of the Lord. Shortfalls do not devastate the Servant, for the campaign for justice is not a personal project but a part of God's eternal purpose."

As examples, Hanson writes, "The medical doctor in [a refugee camp], laboring in the midst of seemingly endless need, perseveres not by scaling down objectives to saving one infant out of ten but by working indefatigably out of yearning for the world in which there shall no longer be 'an infant that lives but a few days' (v. 20). The relief worker ... steers the food-laden lorry up a dangerous mountain pass in commitment to the world in which 'no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it' (v. 19)." And Hanson concludes, "It will be a sorry world that takes a vision of God's new heaven and new earth out of its social justice equation."

And then there are the short parables in Matthew 13. Unlike Isaiah and Zechariah, Jesus didn't describe the kingdom. Instead, he used comparisons, similes: "The kingdom of heaven is like ...." In these parables, he tells us the kingdom is like a tiny seed that grows into a great tree, tiny yeast that leavens the entire day's baking, treasure hidden in a field and a pearl that a person wants so badly that he will sell everything else he owns to purchase it. These parables are all about the kingdom of God that is a part of us. We who follow Jesus possess the seed of the kingdom, the yeast of God's love and the treasure of the Good News, the message that is valuable beyond all others.

Yes, we need to hear about the kingdom of God which Jesus illustrated by comparison and the Isaiah passage described through vision, for because it is already begun, we can model it here and now in and through the church.

Sure, we cannot do it perfectly, but the church of all places should be at least an outpost of the kingdom of God where the needs of each member are the concerns of all, where the elderly are loved and cherished and remembered, where children are loved and safe and free to explore, where God is worshiped by the whole community and where we never cease in our efforts to help others.

We can't do it perfectly, and it won't be a utopia, but a vision that helps us to translate the vision of Isaiah into something that is real.

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth (not some utopia, "nowhere" or "not-place") as it is in heaven.

Help us to do our part to make it so, Lord.

**Commentary on the 2nd Half of Isaiah 65**

The second half of the 65th chapter of Isaiah (vv. 17-25, today's reading) echoes perhaps the most lyrical eschatological vision in the entire OT, Isaiah 11:6-8. It was captured in music (by Randall Thompson, "The Peaceable Kingdom," 1936), poetry (by Jon Silkin, The Peaceable Kingdom, 1954) and in the celebrated series of 62 paintings by Edward Hicks ("Peaceable Kingdom," begun in 1820 and continued, unfinished, until Hicks' death in 1849). Isaiah's vision of a new heaven and a new earth, rendered twice in the book that bears his name, has provided hope and inspiration to countless people in two of the world's great religions.

The version of that vision found in today's reading follows an oracle of judgment (vv. 1-16) in which God's punishment of Israel's iniquities is defended as the righteous actions of a righteous judge ("I will measure into their laps full payment for their actions," v. 7c). That punishment, however, is not all-consuming; for the sake of God's righteous "servants" (v. 8), a remnant will be preserved (vv. 8-9) that will settle in peace in the rich pasture land of Sharon in the north and the Valley of Achor in the south (v. 10) -- the totality of a reconstructed and resanctified Israel. In such a state, whoever invokes a blessing or takes an oath will do so by "the God of faithfulness" (v. 16), and not by the false deities with which apostate Israel had formerly consorted (vv. 3, 4, 7, 11).

"For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth" (v. 17a) is the reason for such an astonishing volte-face on the part of Israel. It is the divine initiative, in which "the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind" (v. 17b), that changes the hearts of the Israelites and not their own will. It is Israel's sovereign savior who is "about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight" (v. 18), and not Israel's own rehabilitative efforts. The vision of the prophet is transfused with divine grace; without ever using the Hebrew word for grace (chen), the prophet makes clear that Yahweh's grace, as far as Israel's future is concerned, is all; grace, for Israel, is everything. Israel's efforts, through centuries of tepid devotion and notorious backsliding (probably at least some of "the former things" referred to in v. 17), have counted for nothing.

One of the leitmotifs running through the second and third portions of the book of Isaiah (chapters 40-55 and chapters 56-66, sometimes referred to as Second and Third Isaiah, respectively) is the call for the Israelites to remember or not to remember "former things" or "the things of old" (43:18; see also 41:22; 42:9; 43:9; 46:9; 48:3). In some instances (e.g., here and 43:18), the prophet is referring to the "bad old days," when Israel had wandered from the path of Yahwism into idolatry and suffered the consequent punishment. In other instances (such as 46:9), the prophet is referring to the "good old days," when God's steadfast faithfulness brought Israel through troublous times. The prophet neither romanticizes nor vilifies the past, which is simply a container of time made good or bad by Israel's responsiveness (or lack thereof) to God's faithfulness.

The scope of this oracle of salvation, which began on a cosmic note ("new heavens and a new earth"), now centers on Jerusalem and its people (v. 19), the epicenter of Israelite national and religious life and the symbol of Israel's complicated relationship with its God. One of the oldest cities in the world (inhabited since the fifth millennium B.C., and first mentioned in the Egyptian "Execration Texts" of ca. 1900 B.C.; fuller non-biblical references to Jerusalem appear in the Amarna letters, also linked to Egypt, of the 14th-century B.C.), Jerusalem became inextricably intertwined with the identity of biblical Israel when David captured the city (or some portion thereof, see Judges 1:21) from its Jebusite inhabitants in the 11th century B.C. and the City of David was made the capital of the United Monarchy. Jerusalem was chosen because of its strategic location (easily fortified in the central hill country of Judah), because of its already well-established importance in the region (as attested by the Amarna correspondence), and because it belonged to none of the tribes David was seeking to unite. By choosing Jerusalem as the seat of political, military and religious power, David was offering the 12 tribes a restart on their identity as God's chosen people.

And over time, Jerusalem became the most chosen spot in the religious consciousness of the chosen people, largely because of David's transference of the Ark of the Covenant to the city (2 Samuel 6:12-16) and Solomon's construction of the temple which became the Ark's permanent home in the following generation (1 Kings 8:6-9). From that point on, Jerusalem -- or, more commonly, as its cognomen "Zion" -- began to assume almost mythic proportions in biblical literature. By the time of the writing of the book of Revelation (ca. A.D. 100), the "new Jerusalem" was the center of cosmic redemption (Revelation 21:2). That prominent biblical theme is sounded most lyrically here.

The signs of the new heavens and new earth envisioned by Isaiah begin with the elimination of two of the ancient world's most pervasive scourges, high infant mortality and low life expectancy (v. 20). Exact figures on infant mortality in the ancient world are impossible to secure, but general scholarly consensus is that prior to the 19th century, between 30 and 50 percent of children did not reach their fifth birthday, a fact of life so obvious to ancient people that it rarely occasioned comment, as it, unusually, does here. (See, for example, the dated but classic study by L. Emmett Holt, "Infant Mortality, Ancient and Modern, An Historical Sketch," Archives of Pediatrics 30 [1913], 885-915, retrieved June 6, 2016, from neonatology.org.) Because of the precariousness of childhood, most people in the ancient world could expect to live only to about 35 (unless they had survived past age 10, in which case they had average chances of living to 50). Hobbes' description of life as "nasty, brutish and short" applied as well to most people in the state of biblical Israel as to most people in the state of nature.

It was precisely that dolorous quotidian existence experienced by most people in most societies throughout most of history that the prophet sees coming to an imminent end. The regular ravages of warfare to which Israel was subjected by the dominant powers in the ancient Near East -- the Egyptians, the Hittites, the Aramaeans, the Assyrians and the Babylonians -- meant that conquest, capture, despoilment, displacement and slavery were ever-present realities for the ordinary populace (usually described as the `am ha-aretz, "the people of the land," Genesis 23:7, 12, 13; Leviticus 20:2; 2 Kings 11:14, 18, 19, 20; Jeremiah 34:19; etc.). When God promises through the prophet that the Israelites "shall build houses and inhabit them" and "plant vineyards and eat their fruit" (v. 21; cf. v. 22), the statement is a radical overturning of what, for ancient Israel, was simply normal.

The oracle concludes with a reprise of the "peaceable kingdom" envisioned in slightly different form earlier in the book at 11:6-9. The variations between the two visions are insignificant relative to their main point, which is that the center of the redeemed world in which both human and beast "shall not hurt or destroy," will be Zion, "my holy mountain, says the LORD" (v. 25; cf. 11:9). Israel's highest calling, for this prophet, is to be the locus, channel and partner in universal divine blessing.

**Some of the current members of the Consultation on Common Texts that have put together the Reformed Common Lectionary are:**

* American Baptist Churches/USA
* The Anglican Church of Canada
* Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops
* Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
* Christian Reformed Church in North America
* Church of the Brethren
* Episcopal Church
* Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
* Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada
* Free Methodist Church in Canada
* Liturgy and Life: American Baptist Fellowship of Liturgical Renewal
* Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod
* Mennonite Church
* National Conference of Catholic Bishops of the United States
* North American Lutheran Church
* Polish National Catholic Church
* Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
* Presbyterian Church in Canada
* Reformed Church in America
* Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship
* United Church of Canada
* United Church of Christ
* United Methodist Church
* Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Utopia,\_Ohio [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66 (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching & Preaching)*, Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1st edition 1995. Paul D. Hanson is Florence Corliss Lamont Research Professor of Divinity at Harvard Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he has taught since 1971. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)