

**“Hope in Hard Times”**  
Isaiah 65:17-25, Luke 21:5-19  
Rev. Patricia Dutcher-Walls  
Nov 13th, 2022

Let's pray!

Gracious God made the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord our rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

On first glance these two scripture passages from Isaiah and Luke couldn't be more different. The reading from Isaiah is a hopeful, beautiful scene of peace and plenty promised for God's people. By contrast the reading from Luke paints an ominous picture of distress and warfare that will tear families apart and cause persecution and suffering for the faithful.

There are times these days when that picture of trouble and stress feels a lot like what we're going through, and Isaiah's vision seems like just a preposterous daydream that would never ever happen. However in the scope of biblical theology these two readings are related these very different images, or if you will two sides of the same coin and that coin is called apocalyptic theology. So, I'm a professor you're going to get a little bit of information here. So just a pause for explanation. The word 'apocalypse' is a Greek word that means a 'revelation' or a disclosure of hidden mysteries, hidden things. So you will be an apocalypse is the disclosure of something that's been hidden. Apocalyptic literature is any writing that deals with the revelation of cosmic mysteries. Often such apocalyptic thought deals with the future, disclosing divine intentions and interventions that will shape what is to come.

You may know sort of modern day apocalyptic thought with the idea of an enthusiastic sometimes raggedy street preacher standing on a corner shouting “the end of the world is near”. Well! that image has its roots in the end of the world literature in the Bible. Those stream of apocalyptic thought really took a long time for apocalyptic thought to weave its way around the biblical world. It runs for about 500 years, this kind of thought speculation about hidden mysteries and the future. Its earliest presence is in the prophets who spoke about the 'day of the Lord' and that day of the Lord is either a judge day of judgment or day of salvation that God would bring.

This line of thought overtime became a full blown theological worldview, one of the many at that time. Flourishing in the 200 years before the birth of Christ and continuing into the New Testament era. So about 200 before the common era and into the New Testament era is when lots and lots of people were thinking apocalyptic kinds of thoughts. In the centuries leading up to the time of Christ apocalyptic thought was all over the place in all types of Jewish literature. So how many of you have heard of the

Dead Sea Scrolls? To the Qumran Community? Those Dead Sea Scrolls are filled with apocalyptic literature and they come right from this time just before the time of Christ.

And, but there was lots of other Jewish literature that was apocalyptic as well as their apocalyptic passages in the Bible itself and in the New Testament particularly the Book of Revelation. The entire Book of Revelation is an apocalyptic book. Now, in the Hebrew Bible there was a major theme in theology in the centuries before Christ and that was the expectation of a Messiah that the Lord would restore Israel after centuries of oppression from the empires of the world. Can you imagine being except for maybe one little blip, for 750 years your nation was controlled by a world empire one or the other.

First the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, then the Persians and then the Greeks. So over the course of 750 years you'd get pretty upset about where is God? and why is it God not hearing me when I say help. So that expectation that God would hear you and would send the Messiah, would redeem God's people then got married to this apocalyptic worldview at least in the centuries just before Jesus came. So the expectation that God would send our a Saviour or revealer kept up with apocalyptic thought. Produced a variety of salvation prophecies containing visions of universal peace and justice and a newly restored cosmic order. Now that's the peace side, side of the apocalyptic coin that we heard in Isaiah.

Isaiah presents a vision where God will create Jerusalem as a joy where there will be no more weeping or distress where everyone will enjoy the fruit of their vineyards and fields. Where even antagonistic creatures like lions and lambs will live together in safety. However, that desperate expectation for the Lord to restore Israel after centuries of oppression also fueled visions of a more judgmental current. These alternate images the other side of the apocalyptic coin if you will, were of a final resolution to the suffering and sin of Israel that was accomplished through a time of warfare and judgment. While these more negative you will visions also looked the eventual sort of restoration of creation, they first envisioned a time of suffering, judgment and the sort of coming apart of the whole cosmic order.

So that, those unjust oppressors who have been oppressing you for 750 years get what they deserve in this time of judgement. And then, a restoration would happen. This theological vision lies behind the reading from Luke. Which expressed characteristic elements of nation warring against nation the persecution of the righteous, earthquakes, and famines. One caution is necessary in reading such apocalyptic passages from the bible. These are not and were never intended to be accurate predictions of the future as if some great crystal ball was going to be looked into and reveal you, will meet a tall dark stranger. Such readings are not formulas for future events as much as some want to make them into some kind of theological weather forecast that locks God into a set pattern of events. It's really important to remember that all of these are visions they are poetry, they are things unseen that we're just seeing through a glass dark if you will.

The incredible variety and wild imagery and in fact if you read revelation lately, the wild imagery of biblical apocalyptic passages cautions against reducing them to locked down

predictions. And yet, and yet they are sources of real hope in the midst of hard times. Even now, as they were for Jews and Christians oppressed by powers and principalities of this world. Let's see that work particularly in the Isaiah's passage. Isaiah's vision is a poem that uses the best techniques of Hebrew poetry. Ancient Hebrew poetry to convey its beautiful messages here the cosmic revelation uses repetition. Say of the word create, creation to present God's creation of a new heaven and a new earth, a creation that will bring joy that creates a restored Jerusalem and reveals God's delight in God's people. The poem uses imagery, imagery of the agricultural life that everyone in ancient Israel knew and lived out in their extended families where everyone beneath their vine and fig tree could live in peace and unafraid. The prophet uses dramatic language to communicate. In describing the long and secure life that God will ensure. The poet proclaims no parent will ever watch as their children are victims of calamity, or as the Hebrew expresses it this is like you know it's too bad against buried in the English translation, where the Hebrew says, "where no children are ever beset by sudden terror."

And when I was doing my translation and read that, instantly images of Ukraine and Russian bombing came to mind. That's sudden terror and that's what God is promising will not happen anymore in this vision of peace. Such poetry conveys messages of hope. However, the poetry also recognizes the realities of life as the people have experienced it. Visions of a time when there is no more crying or distressed, acknowledge a current reality filled with suffering from conquering armies to devastating droughts. Whether ancient famines or today's climate crises. A picture of a people at peace in their communities reaping the fruit of their land confront the history of conquering empires from Babylon to Rome to Russia. Who waged oppressive wars for their own power and gain. Words of comfort about a long life and children who do not die too soon confront the realities of war and bloodshed, of food scarcity whether from invading armies or expanding deserts from global warming. The horrible and traumatic realities behind the hopeful images actually make the images more powerful.

The prophet shows that God knows what we are going through God has seen and heard our suffering God knows what the world is like, God is not some God far away there who doesn't care God has heard the crying of God's people. God knows and understands the sorrow and the suffering people have experienced and God speaks words of hope into that trauma and loss. These visions of peace and safety of rejoicing and delight. Now they can be read as only about the future some far off yet longed foretaste that we may perhaps reach someday and apocalyptic literature does kind of convey that far away time as a word of hope.

Sadly however, apocalyptic literature has sometimes been used to ill effect, in that it has been used to keep people who are oppressed more oppressed. while saying, oh! there's a better day coming. Such language has been used for example to suppress those under slavery conveying, Oh! just be quiet. Go along with your oppression for now there's a reward later. That's a perverse use of a theology of hope. However, a dynamic is set up when powerful words of hope are spoken into harsh realities of a present time.

Those words of new life judge the current regime. The hope confronts the wrong, by reminding the audience of how different God's reality can be. The dynamic of hopefulness in the face of trauma helps us to see what the Holy one intends for the good of creation. The poet Isaiah, and the gospel writer of Luke, the author of 'Revelation' all confront realities of anguish, and all proclaim that those realities are not God's last word.

In showing us a vision of restored and reconciled creation that confronts our miserable and unjust realities these apocalyptic passages also function to issue a call to action. Such a dynamic calls us in turn, not just to listen and envision a time of justice and peace, but to work for it. That time when justice and peace becomes a Christian ethic, a Christian way of life, to act out of hopefulness, to act for joy, to let our hope be our call to faithfulness to the ways of compassion, love, and justice of the one who creates hope for us through Christ.

The theological insights of both sides of this apocalyptic coin, the hope filled vision of Isaiah, and the cautionary vision of Luke is where today, we can connect with such readings. To know that apocalyptic thought was swirling around both Jewish and Christian communities in the time before and in the time of the early church is to appreciate how much this understanding of the cosmos helped the early Christians express theology. For example, whether the vision is one of a peaceable Kingdom or warnings of warfare and persecution, apocalyptic theology asserts that God is in charge.

A sovereign, creator God has all things well in hand. We as mere humans may need a special revelation of such cosmic realities but we can trust God's power to reshape the world. We can also trust that God has seen the suffering and misery of God's people. That we are not mere victims of the powerful, who would turn us into their pawns but, rather we are valued and blessed children of God. Finally, we can trust through these visions that God cares about the suffering of the little ones and God confronts the oppression of the powerful ones. Such compassion and justice impelled God's intention to set the cosmos to rights, to heal and repair. And such divine compassion and justice impells our response, a response of gratitude, a response that animates our living out, that same compassion and justice as followers of Christ.

May it be so.

Amen!