

Give Thanks: For Our Future  
Nov. 13, 2022  
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**Isaiah 65:17-25 CEB**

17 Look! I'm creating a new heaven and a new earth:  
past events won't be remembered;  
they won't come to mind.

18 Be glad and rejoice forever  
in what I'm creating,  
because I'm creating Jerusalem as a joy  
and her people as a source of gladness.

19 I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad about my people.  
No one will ever hear the sound of weeping or crying in it again.

20 No more will babies live only a few days,  
or the old fail to live out their days.  
The one who dies at a hundred will be like a young person,  
and the one falling short of a hundred will seem cursed.

21 They will build houses and live in them;  
they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

22 They won't build for others to live in,  
nor plant for others to eat.  
Like the days of a tree will be the days of my people;  
my chosen will make full use of their handiwork.

23 They won't labor in vain,  
nor bear children to a world of horrors,  
because they will be people blessed by the Lord,  
they along with their descendants.

24 Before they call, I will answer;  
while they are still speaking, I will hear.

25 Wolf and lamb will graze together,  
and the lion will eat straw like the ox,  
but the snake—its food will be dust.  
They won't hurt or destroy at any place on my holy mountain,  
says the Lord.

**Give Thanks For Our Future**

I was writing a paper on the involvement of the early Methodists in the beginnings of the Sunday School movement for a seminary class, when I came across a rather interesting side story. There were minutes from a Church Council meeting where the Sunday

School Union, an ecumenical organization who provided Sunday School curriculum, was described as being, “of Satan” because Sunday School was not commanded by scripture and, “we were not responsible for other parents’ children.” It’s hard to imagine a time when Sunday School was considered “of Satan,” isn’t it?

But the story that really caught my attention had nothing to do with Sunday School, it was about bathrooms.

In the same Church Council meeting in the early 1800’s, there was a robust discussion of whether indoor plumbing was Biblically permissible. (Thompson, R Jan. "Birth of the Sunday School movement in the Church of the Brethren." *Brethren Life And Thought* 15, no. 4 (1970 1970): 217-229. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 23, 2015) p 223-224)

The minutes record that a fervent argument was made in opposition to those new fangled flush toilets being installed inside the church building because Deuteronomy 23:12-14 \*clearly\* states that:

<sup>12</sup>*You shall have a designated area outside the camp to which you shall go.*

<sup>14b</sup>*your camp must be holy, so that (God) may not see anything indecent among you and turn away from you.*

Therefore, it is not \*Biblical,\* to have indoor bathrooms because they are indecent and may cause God to turn away from the church! I bet you didn’t know that indoor plumbing was indecent, did you? You really can’t make this stuff up!

If you apply the Wesleyan Quadrilateral - Scripture, Reason, Tradition, and Experience - especially the scientific understanding of germ theory that Reason has brought us since the time of Moses, this scripture really makes a lot of sense. We now understand that if you’re digging a latrine it is definitely a good idea to keep it distant from drinking water sources and living spaces - Kosher laws really did benefit public health in the time before germ theory. But we also understand that indoor plumbing is very different from an outdoor latrine. This is why we take the Bible seriously instead of literally.

That church, who was convinced that Sunday School and indoor plumbing were “unbiblical” closed not long after those minutes were taken. I mean, when you had young children, would you have wanted to go to a church with no children’s programming and no indoor plumbing?

What's sad to me about this true story is that these people got so hung up on the rules and customs of the past without doing any theological work about why those rules made sense then, but don't make sense now, that they missed out on what God was doing in the present...and how God was leading the Church into the future.

**Look! God is doing a new thing!**

**There's going to be so much good change that nobody will even remember the past. Rejoice, my friends! It's going to be so ridiculously safe that it will be as if lions and lambs are cuddling together!**

This reading is from what scholars refer to as 3rd Isaiah.

We think that the first writer of the scroll of Isaiah was a member of the royal court of the Kingdom of Judah, who was carried off into exile by the Babylonians. So maybe the original Isaiah wrote the first 23-39 chapters in the 8th century before Christ.

Then the scroll was passed on to another author - maybe Isaiah's son, maybe his daughter? Maybe an apprentice? The author of second Isaiah never describes himself. What we see is that in chapters 40-55 the writing style shifts - kind of like the difference between reading a book by the author and fan fiction based on the author's work. Like the difference between *Pride and Prejudice* and *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*... except maybe better.

Today's reading comes from Third Isaiah, chapters 55- 66, who is writing about 200 years after 1st Isaiah, in the 6th century before Christ. In those 200 years the Babylonians have been conquered and King Cyrus of the Persians has issued an order to all the conquered peoples to go home and rebuild your cities and Temples and worship your Gods.

So 3rd Isaiah - whomever they were - was writing to say that all the horrors of the exile were over. It was like God was creating the world all over again because the center of the Jewish world - Jerusalem and the Temple were being rebuilt. The people were being invited to go home and rebuilt their lives...except rebuilding is never the same as it was before.

The closest modern analogy I can think of is post World War 2. The housing Boom and the Baby Boom of the mid-Twentieth century was a time of building houses and living in them and bearing children, not into the world of war-time horrors, but into a time of growing prosperity and safety. A time where each family could sit under their own vine and fig tree and eat the fruit of their harvest.

Look! God is doing a new thing!

There's going to be so much good change that nobody will even remember the past. Rejoice, my friends!

Except we do remember the past.

We carry past trauma, physically, in our bodies.

We carry idealized memories of the past - nostalgia for a way of living that we knew how to navigate.

We carry old rules and old customs, and old preferences for how we do things long after they're not really working anymore.

And sometimes we try to use the Bible to justify old ways of doing things that no longer make sense in a world with indoor plumbing...

- and social media
- And online shopping
- And an economy where "More than one-third of U.S. families that work full time year-round do not earn enough to cover a basic family budget, according to a recent report from researchers at [Brandeis University's diversitydatakids.org](https://www.brandeis.edu/diversitydatakids.org) program at the Institute for Child, Youth and Family Policy."  
<https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2022/09/06/families-full-time-work-afford-basics/7959893001/>

So, many people are working two or three jobs, which leaves them little time for things like church. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/inflation-american-workers-are-taking-on-second-jobs/>

- A world where the lives of younger generations are very different from the Baby Boom experience.
  - Millennials are entering their 40's and have kids in grade school and middle school, and they feel like they just barely survived pandemic schooling.
  - Gen Z are in their 20's and can't afford housing even though they have full time, skilled jobs.
  - Gen Y are terrified to go to school because of school shootings and wonder if the earth will be habitable by the time they grow up because the people in power - who are all older than them, seem to value the economy more than the climate.

And yet in the midst of all these recent traumas the words of 3rd Isaiah still ring out because I believe that God has never stopped doing a new thing.

Like the people in that Church Council meeting in the early 1800's we have a choice.

Do we echo the words of the Church Council member who went on record stating that "we (are) not responsible for other parents' children?"

Do we say to the next generations, and the unchurched folks of all generations in our neighborhood that, "we are not responsible" for the fact that most of our neighbors don't know God or have a church community to belong to?

Do we say this is how we have always done church, and we will not change just to humor younger generations?

Or are we willing to love our neighbors? All of our neighbors?

Are we willing to reach out to the friends we haven't met yet?

Or do we only care about the friends we already have?

And when we love people, we make accommodations for them.

Like learning how to text so we can communicate with grandkids.

Welcoming new friends means asking how we can better relate to our community.

Just like people in the 1800's preferred to go to a church with indoor plumbing and Sunday School classes. People today prefer to be a part of a church community that offers intergenerational activities, online giving, social media connections, and ways to practice neighbor-love together in our local communities.

Look! God is doing a new thing!

I've seen God do so many amazing things. So many miracles of redemption and provision and growth and restoration, where people are even a little bit willing to let God lead us in God's new direction. If we are willing to cooperate with God, God is more than willing to show up!

**What good new things do you see God doing in the world?**

So for our Spiritual Practice time today, I want to ask you to take a few minutes to think - What good new things do you see God doing in the world?