

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost  
Isaiah 65:17-25  
Luke 2:5-19

First United Church of Christ, Northfield  
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### A New Creation

This Thursday is Thanksgiving, when we remember the Pilgrims who celebrated the alleged first Thanksgiving of the English in the New World. I say “alleged” because, as a Virginian, I know that the Thanksgiving celebration at Jamestown, Virginia, took place several years before the Pilgrim’s at Plymouth, Massachusetts. Yet we have chosen to remember the pious Pilgrims rather than the fun loving Virginians, a fact which says more about us than it does about them.

One reason we do this is the myth that the Pilgrims weren’t all that pious. Many would distinguish the Pilgrims who landed at Plymouth in 1620 from the much larger body of Puritans who landed at Boston in 1630. This latter group, so the myth goes, were much more pious and severe than the Pilgrims, whom we sometimes think of as a kind of proto-UCC group with lots of committees and probably even pledge cards.

Not true – the Pilgrims were themselves Puritans. And like all Puritans they sought to purify the Church of England by removing from it all practices that lacked a Biblical warrant. They were Christian primitivists who sought to reestablish the church they found in the New Testament where there would be no Episcopal hierarchy, no prayer books, no rituals or clergy vestments, and no celebration of Christmas.

The group of Puritans we know as the Pilgrims began to meet at William Brewster’s house in Scrooby, Yorkshire. Their radicalism, not their tolerance, distinguished them from the larger body of Puritans. If the Church of England could not be reformed, they were willing to separate themselves from it and form their own particular congregation, an act of political treason which was rejected by the majority of Puritans.

Yet separate is exactly what they did, moving to Holland in 1607 and Plymouth in 1620. William Bradford, who as a young man had joined the company while it was still worshiping at Brewster’s house, later became governor of Plymouth Plantation, serving in all for thirty years. Bradford wrote a remarkable history of the Pilgrim’s early years, including their time in Holland, their voyage to the New World, and their suffering after their arrival. I’d like to read a bit of this history. I’ll begin with part of his critique of the Church of England and then continue with his vision of the church his company hoped to create:

“How not only were these base and beggarly ceremonies were unlawful, but also that the lordly and tyrannous power of he prelates ought not to be submitted unto; which thus, contrary to the freedom of the Gospel, would load and burden men’s consciences and by their compulsive power make a profane mixture of persons and things in the worship of God . . . .

So many, therefore, of these professors as saw the evil of these things in these parts, and whose hearts the Lord had touched with heavenly zeal for his Truth, they shook off this yoke of antichristian bondage, and as the Lord's free People joined themselves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a church estate, in the fellowship of the Gospel, to walk in all His ways made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavors, whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them. And that it cost them something, this ensuing history will declare . . . .”

This vision of a free people, joined together by covenant into a church, helped to sustain these Pilgrims during the years following their departure from England, during times which indeed cost them something.

Scripture itself is a treasury of visions able to sustain and encourage God's people in times of suffering. The vision of Isaiah which we heard this morning is one of the most compelling of all these visions. Most scholars agree that two different authors, writing generations apart, composed the bulk of our book of Isaiah. In addition there were several other contributors, one of whom may be responsible for the vision we heard. Writing at a time soon after Israel's return from exile in Babylon, this author sort to encourage a people harried by enemies and faced with the challenge of rebuilding their community. In this vision, God is about to create a new heaven and a new earth, reconciling opposites so that the wolf and the lamb shall feed together. If God can do this, certainly, with God's help, the people of Israel can reestablish their lives in the land of their ancestors.

The latter part of this post-exilic vision hearkens back to the vision of the author of the first part of Isaiah. Writing before the exile, this author sees the peaceable kingdom, where all creatures that on earth do dwell will dwell together in harmony. Isaiah writes:

“The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”

Fair to say from Isaiah's time to our own, this vision has inspired those who would work for a world where all can live in harmony and where no one is afraid. It has sustained those who do the blessed work of peace making.

But is it true? How would you even go about determining the truth of such a thing as a vision? To me an interesting answer can be found in the life of St. Anthony, a third century Egyptian monastic, who spent many years living in absolute solitude. During this time, he was visited by angels and also by demons disguised as angels. Years later, when asked how he could distinguish true from false angels, he said he knew by how he felt afterwards. When an angel left, he felt strengthened; when a demon left, he felt filled with horror.

Using St. Anthony's test, we can say that a vision is true, if, like a ministering angel, it strengthens and sustains us. In both its versions, Isaiah's vision does this. It is true today, as it was true in the time it was written. Working for peace, for the reconciliation of opposites, one is sustained by the vision that these things are God's will and that in God all things are possible.

As powerful as this vision is, we are still separated from us. Like a great work of art, the vision inspires us and lifts us up, but we are still not in the picture. There is a distance between us and the vision. Jesus closed the distance, putting us in the picture. He did this at the beginning of his ministry when he proclaimed: "The time is fulfilled. The reign (the kingdom) of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel."

In this vision the reign of God, the peaceable kingdom, is breaking in. Where is it? It is in Jesus himself. His words, his actions, and most especially the community he founded are the reign of God incarnate.

What do we do to be part of this reign of God, this new community? Repent and believe in the gospel, believe the vision Jesus has proclaimed. Repent here does not just mean feeling sorry for our sins. To repent, from the Greek *metanoia*, means to turn one's life around, to find a new source of being, so that one no longer lives for oneself. Rather in the reign of God, love, not selfishness, becomes the animating power of one's life, so that one becomes a participant, not a spectator in the reign of God.

I'd like to step back for a moment and comment on what I've just said. Living in a skeptical time, we ask: Is this true? We need to know. We are asked to base our lives upon this vision. For many of us, just because it's in the Bible doesn't make it true. We've been taught to question authority. Don't trust anybody over thirty was a mantra of my generation. Many years later, this puts us in a kind of awkward situation, as now we're tempted to say don't trust anybody under . . . Well, never mind, we don't need to go there.

If we don't trust the vision of the proclaimed by Jesus on authority, how can we trust it? Remembering St. Anthony we can look to our own experience of this vision. Does it strengthen us, sustain us in difficult times? Does it draw out the best that in us – our capacity to love and to live beyond ourselves?

Each of us has to answer these questions for ourselves, mindful that Christians have witnessed for almost two millennia that the vision of the reign of God is good and

true. Though I do not have time to develop it in this sermon, our New Testament passage shows how this vision sustained early Christians in a time of tumult and rumors of war, a time not unlike our own.

Within ourselves we can find more evidence for the truth of the vision. Does it have the power to bring us to repentance? Does it give us hope that we can change our lives, be made new and be part of God's new creation? In our liturgy today we have already confessed our sins, acknowledging we are not who we want to be. Does the vision empower us to change, not to remain stuck where we don't want to be? Again, we are called to answer these questions out of our own experience. How we answer will be the truth of the vision of the reign of God for us.

If our answer is yes, then we affirm we find access through this vision to the transforming power of God's love. We recognize we can change and be part of the new community Jesus brought to earth. We recognize that the power is there for us to live out the commandments of Jesus to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. We recognize that in this vision we are offered our full dignity as human beings, participants in the very reign of God.

When over half their company died during that first winter in New England, the Pilgrims were sustained by the vision of being a covenanted church, a people free to walk in the ways of God. The exiles returned to Israel were sustained by vision of God's power to create a new earth where opposites would be reconciled and all would dwell in peace. We are heirs to these visions, and as well we are sustained by the vision incarnated in Jesus that the reign of God is at hand.

The world can change and so can we.

Thanks be to God.

Note: In writing this sermon I realized it's one of three I want to preach while at First Church. The others I'll preach the last two Sundays in January. They're basically three sermons for skeptics, sort of how one can be Christian while struggling with doubt. This one seeks to base the truth of Christianity on its effects, the good it does in our lives and world. On January 20, I'll seek to show another basis for the truth of Christianity, this time in the nature of the community, the church Jesus established. On January 27, I'll try to show that being Christian, indeed accepting the need for a spiritual life in any form, is just that, a need, part of who we are.

