

## **“Holy Amnesia’ and Second Chances”**

**Isaiah 65: 17-25**

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**The House of Hope Presbyterian Church**

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### **Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Hello. My name is Julia and I’m a cynic.

I come to you as a cynic in recovery – most of the time – but relapse is real. Cynicism replaced idealism in my first corporate job decades ago – thus the author and the book from which our bulletin quote originates.\* I mention this today because this passage from Isaiah was written for cynics. This passage contains an overwhelming image of hope and beauty, and is filled with so much good news it’s meant to carry us away.

We hear and envision the wild, immense, and maybe impossible expectation for woman, man and beast, to have hope even though they returned from exile to find their homeland filled with corruption, bloodshed, and injustice. The spirits and souls of listeners were wounded by captivity – even a spirit that has prayed faithfully can be broken by abuse. The soul is sustained by freedom, it soars in freedom – but it takes time to heal and rebuilding a civilization of integrity takes time.

So, for our time, I wonder, where do you/we file this image? It is so extraordinary that I think many tuck it in the back of the mind in the life-after-death file. It’s there as something to look forward to – then we can grapple with the overwhelming hope it offers in the next life.

It is so beautiful and idyllic that it could also be filed away with our favorite poetry, prose or literature. Because this good news is so sprawling, the question then becomes do we treat this as a fiction on this side of the grave?

I ask, because I think God files it under ‘action plan.’ It is God’s ‘now,’ it is God’s present time. For God, it’s not just a good idea, it is! For God it’s an imperative. Even though we are not new in body or experience, with whatever failures and, even more risky to the soul, the successes we have had, God suggests we live with the ‘new Jerusalem’ in mind and in heart and in body – that we consciously evaluate where we are and take steps to become as spiritually new or renewed as the baby we baptized today. We are, after all, the followers of the Embodiment of new creation. This is Jesus’ imperative as well.

God’s holy mountain is not just a future vision – after calling disciples as he walked along the lake, Jesus announced, “the kingdom of God has drawn near.” We are invited to cling to one or both visions with heart, mind and soul. If we do not engage it, hold it, have a sense of travelling toward it each day, we are, in the words of one commentator, “left to our own devices.” He of course meant that we are left to our own thoughts, ideas, plans – left to only small and earthly thinking. But now we have these other devices: (Wave cell phone).

The evidence is clear that our technology, while helpful, is also isolating and anxiety inducing. But when not talking about our electronics, the word 'device' can mean making a plan in the best sense; it can also mean to scheme and deceive. A device can be an architectural drawing that shows the potential beauty and shelter of a home or it can be like an M.C. Escher drawing of a staircase where up turns into down and offers no way out. The root for the word 'device' also spawned devised, divisive, dissention, and division. Without the vision of the holy mountain, we are left to our own devices, which means, as our present so clearly demonstrates, we are left to our own divisions. Our own devices do not unify which is so unlike God's vision of wholeness which incorporates animal, vegetable, and mineral. God's vision is inclusive of all, even heaven and earth! Isaiah's vision of God's holy mountain is, like most of Jesus' ministry and teaching, an invitation to enter into a constant cycle of transformative living. We, as Christians, are called to reveal that humanity is not left to its own devices or divisions.

The new wonder for me in this reading today is that as we look around and see the great gap between human endeavors and God's ideal, we hear the good news that God is willing to forget our small to massive misfires and failures. "The former things shall not be remembered ...." Martha Sterne refers to this as 'holy amnesia.' This forgetting on God's part is an invitation to start again, to reinvigorate our following (of) Jesus even more closely and more passionately. This message awaits us each year in the lectionary preaching cycle as we look ahead to Christ the King Sunday next week and then Advent, another beginning. The routine of the church calendar offers us second chances – and third chances – (or, how old am I?), however many we need to engage with the transformational growth this vision invites.

The vision of God's holy mountain intends to put to rest 'a survival of the fittest' kind of world. As women and people of color take more of the lead in business and in life, as young people such as Greta Thunberg take the stage to speak for the future, and even as Christianity itself is being reshaped by another generation, we are seeing a vision of that mountain.

David Whyte says that "everyday people and events continually grind down the smooth machinery of our best hopes and plans" (Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 4, 214). In this, he is saying life induces cynicism and survival of the fittest may seem invigorating at the beginning of a career, but somewhere along the way we may begin to fear being eaten alive; survival of the fittest will not bring satisfaction enough to find meaning and worth at heaven's gate and it is demeaning for others. It creates a survival mentality; it creates us versus them. It is better to have heaven itself along with us at all times. Better to carry a soulful vision of divine imagination that will guide us all along the way. The fullness of the metaphor of God's holy mountain will not materialize in our lifetime on planet Earth but when the wall came down in Berlin, we had a glimpse of it. And I want more of that!

We catch glimpses in our music, certainly in baptism, the Lord's Supper, and in all experiences of true communion. It may not fully materialize but it is among us and real. And, the image of life as climbing that mountain is worthy of a lifetime's concentration, faith and hope.

Thus Whyte says, the spiritual life means “dancing cheek to cheek with wildness.” He quoted poet and author Samuel Coleridge:

*I never find myself at one within the embracement of rocks and hill, a traveler up on Alpine road, but my spirit courses, drives, and eddies, like a leaf in Autumn; a wild activity, of thoughts, imaginations, feelings and impulses of motion, rise up from within me... my whole being is filled with waves, as it were that roll and stumble, one this way and one that way, like things that have no common master (The Heart Aroused, 225).*

To which Whyte adds:

Like things that have no common master. *A marvelous line that speaks to our wish for belonging to something larger than our daily work can provide for us. It speaks to the human necessity to have an experience in the timeless in order to invigorate everything they must do in time. (The Heart Aroused, 225).*

Nurturing the eternal within guards the heart from cynicism. It guides and protects us in the gap between idealism and failure; it revives us when we come down on the wrong side of survival of the fittest, or when we are in exile from safety, joy, and love whether at work or in one's home. Much of what ails society and culture are spiritual problems and have a spiritual solution: a return from our own devices to the vision of God's holy mountain. God is willing to forget our divisive ways, are we? Wherever you have filed this image, I hope you take it out often, it is a treasure map. As Coleridge continued,

*In these moments it has been my creed that death exists only because ideas exist; that life is limitless sensation; that death is a child of organic senses, chiefly the sight; that feelings die by flowing into the mould of intellect. I do not think it possible that any bodily pains could eat out the love and joy that is so substantially part of me, towards hills, and rocks, and steep waters (The Heart Aroused, 225-226)!*

This is our destiny and our destination; this is the journey of our living and our dying. God's holy mountain is a connecting point and a unity; Isaiah pleads with the cynics before him, don't save this for later – live it now. Amen.

\*(Bulletin Quote: How would that dangerous path on the ridge between chaos and order look if I were to say that everything in my life is *enough*, at least to take the next step, to begin? ...At the center of a complex and unfathomable world, then, lies our own experience, our own personal history, and our own peculiar way of approach, ready to be tested again and again against unfolding events. David Whyte, *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America*)