

A NEW CREATION

July 4, 2010

Isaiah 66:10-14; Galatians 6:1-16; Luke 10:1-10, 16-20

No matter whether the image is one of a new Jerusalem, a new creation, or the realm of God, it seems as if throughout the Bible there is this vision and hope that God is constantly in the process of making all things new. From the beginning of Genesis to the end of the Book of Revelation, God is attributed with creating a new heaven and a new earth. In between these two bookends of the Bible, the prophet Isaiah also expects that God will be creating new heavens and a new earth. The same holds true for Jesus, who talks about a new realm in which love for one another will be the norm and the unity of all people will be the highest priority. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that all 3 of our lessons for today emphasize and describe this vision and the hope of what God is doing to make all things new.

In this regard, five hundred years ago, religious people from Europe crossed the Atlantic Ocean in order to explore a new land about which they had heard so many good things. Given how expansive and fertile this land was, they began to refer to this land as a place where God would establish a new heaven and a new earth which they would call the new Israel. To complete this analogy, these religious sojourners kept searching for the perfect place where they could situate God's city on a hill which would be known as the new Jerusalem.

Given this perspective, the religious people from England took this analogy even one step further by viewing their escape from the tyranny of King George and their journey across the Atlantic Ocean as similar to the experience of the Israelites who were liberated from the slavery of Pharaoh by crossing the Red Sea. Once they landed on the shores of this new land and encountered the indigenous people who already were living in this place, they likened these indigenous people to the Amalakites of the Old Testament and claimed the right to slaughter them just as God had directed the Israelites to wipe out many of the heathens in the land of Canaan as they took possession of what they considered to be their promised land. However, even as they seized and occupied more and more land on this new continent, these conquerors still did not feel free. So, after several attempts to negotiate their freedom from the British government, they took up arms and waged war against England and killed thousands upon thousands of their brothers in Christ until they were free from the tyranny of the British governing authorities.

Once these religious people had celebrated their independence, they set their sights westward and claimed this new Israel as their own. Under the aegis of what later

became known as the Manifest Destiny, these religious people believed that God had promised this land to them and had ordained them to possess and occupy this land by whatever means necessary so that they eventually could live in peace and prosperity for the rest of their days just as God had promised the Israelites so very long ago.

Just as Isaiah wrote in our lesson for today about the resurgence of Jerusalem after the Israelites returned from Babylon in order to reestablish themselves in their homeland, so our ancestors rejoiced and took such great delight in this new land of theirs. Here they could be satisfied. Here they could prosper. Here they could find security. Here they could flourish like the grass of the prairies. Here they could be free—all because God supposedly was on their side, as evidenced by their victory in the Revolutionary War. Consequently, they thought that they could do no wrong, and anyone who got in their way or threatened their security and freedom justifiably could be attacked and destroyed because God had given them this land as if it was their birthright.

However, had these religious people paid closer attention specifically to the testimony and witness of Jesus, they might have behaved differently along the way. As we hear today, when Jesus sent out his disciples to spread the good news of God's realm, he instructed them to greet everyone in peace. Some people would be hospitable and welcome them into their homes, and others would not. However, Jesus does not tell his disciples to destroy anyone who rejects them. Instead, Jesus simply says, "If anyone does not welcome you, wipe the dust of that town or of that home off of your feet and go on your way." With this peaceful way of protesting anyone's inhospitality or rejection, Jesus tells his disciples that the realm of God has come very near because no one is going to be killed in retaliation for violating one of the most sacred codes or norms of his day by being inhospitable to a sojourner or a stranger. Besides, the followers of Jesus were supposed to travel without any baggage or extra clothing, which also meant that they probably would be without any weapons. Given that they were supposed to go out as lambs into the midst of wolves in order to proclaim the good news of God's realm to all people, the use of weapons would not exactly fit with this role and responsibility.

In this regard, Jesus did not ask anything of his followers that he himself was not willing to do. Therefore, when he was arrested for threatening the religious authorities of his day and sentenced to death by the governing authorities, Jesus protested in silence until he was about to die when he finally prayed from the cross, "God, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." With these

words of peace, Jesus knew as well as anyone else who could comprehend that the realm of God had come very near to everyone who was the recipient of God's forgiveness.

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, makes reference to this cross of Christ as the cornerstone of his vision of a new creation, which to him was everything. Within this context, Paul suggests that one of our priorities is to bear one another's burdens. In contrast to this suggestion, our second amendment states that we have a right to bear arms as a way of ensuring the security of our free state. How different our country would be if our second amendment would have stated that we are to bear one another's burdens as a way of ensuring the security of our free state. Such an amendment would have fulfilled the law of Christ. Instead, our second amendment is grounded in the law of the flesh, and as Paul warns, "If we sow to our own flesh, then we will reap corruption from the flesh," which is exactly what has happened throughout our history as our ancestors killed one another in a bloody civil war, fought and killed one another as they staked out claims to their land, and continued to fight and kill one another in securing and protecting their turf, no matter whether it was 1920 or 2010.

In contrast to bearing one another's burdens, Paul also says that in this new creation, we are to carry our own loads. Such a suggestion sounds very much like pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps and making it on our own, which, of course, accentuates the rugged individualism, independence, and competitive spirit that has characterized the ethos of our country for over 200 years. However, what if our own load for each and every one of us is the responsibility of bearing one another's burdens? What kind of cooperative spirit could be nurtured with this kind of ethos—an ethos that Paul summarizes when he says, "Whenever we have an opportunity, let us strive for the good of all?"

Given our pledge of allegiance, we do have good intentions of liberty and justice for all, but in reality, we live quite differently. As a nation, we are too much in this world for ourselves, our individual freedoms, our homeland security, our might that makes right, the pride of being number one, the letter of the law over the spirit of justice, and the making of a profit instead of sharing with everyone who has need. The growing disparity between the most wealthy people in this country and those who camp out every night on some church property is an indication that striving for the good of all and justice for all is simply giving lip service to values that have no merit in the eyes of those who go to bed hungry every night or those who have to sacrifice the health of their children in order to pay the rent.

Given these realities, we are drawn once again to the vision and hope of a new Jerusalem, a new creation, and the realm of God where every thing that is wrong in this world is made right, and all who are impoverished or oppressed today will be able to sleep peacefully tonight. In this regard, peace not only is the absence of war, peace also is the absence of injustice, oppression, corruption, and violence that plague our nation. Consequently, we are not a nation at peace. To pretend otherwise not only is to deceive ourselves, but also is to mock God and to make Jesus' death on the cross a death that was in vain.

For as much as we have to celebrate today—our independence, our freedom, and our democracy—we also have to acknowledge that there still is so much for which we need to repent. Given that our government is a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, all of us, from the least to the greatest, have a responsibility for sowing to the Spirit, greeting everyone in peace, doing what is right, striving for the good of all, protesting without the use of violence, bearing one another's burdens, accepting persecution for the cross of Christ, and never giving up on the vision and the hope of a new creation and the realm of God where God's love is the norm and God's peace is a reality. If we truly want to fulfill the law of Christ today, then I would suggest that repentance, not independence, is the real order of this day, so that one day soon we all may live together in peace in God's new creation as made evident and brought near in Jesus, our Christ. Amen.