

“God’s Vision for Our Times”

Isaiah 65: 17-25, Luke 21: 56-19

Twenty-Forth Sunday after Pentecost/C, November 18, 2007

Lynne M. Dolan

I want to begin this morning by asking a few questions. First, how many of you currently work or have worked in Hartford? How many of you have ever lived in a major metropolitan city? How many of you have made a significant pilgrimage outside the United States where you were able to interact with people from another culture (something different than a vacation)? How many of you have lived in Glastonbury all your life?

Our vision of the world is shaped by where we work and live. If we work in Hartford or New Haven or another urban center, it is easy to recognize the differences between that community and this community. As you drive into the city you see abandoned buildings. You notice whether the streets are clean and whether or you feel safe. You know where it is okay to travel at night and where this is not such a good idea. You see the signs of neglect and make assumptions, correct or incorrect about what you see.

If you live in the city, you may see the same things, but you understand them differently. You know what neighborhoods to avoid at night, you know where people take pride in owning their own homes, and you know the toll neglect takes. If you own a home in Hartford you pay closer attention to what the mayor is doing, who is elected to the City Council, and how the money is allocated. After all, every dollar is precious to the health and welfare of the city. You become an outspoken advocate for your children and your neighbor’s children. A corrupt mayor or ineffective Superintendent of schools can have devastating effects on an already fragile community. Everything feels a bit more tenuous in the city. The infrastructure feels like it is one bad storm away from collapsing, the schools can feel like they are one gang war away from ruin.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, this sense of urban fragility became clear to millions of Americans. After seeing the devastation from the storm, many people claimed they were not aware of the dire poverty in Mississippi. They didn’t know there are two New Orleans, one the tourists see and another that most folks never see. That shadow world has been revealed in the aftermath of the hurricane. Our colleagues at Biloxi Back Bay Mission confirm that the recovery efforts from Katrina will go on for many years. Sometimes it feels as though the world is coming apart at the seams. Hurricane after hurricane brings devastation to parts of this country and other developing countries like the Dominican Republic that can hardly afford to rebuild year after year. Wild fires threaten the homes and livelihood of people in Southern California. There are famines in Africa and droughts in the Deep South. There are wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the Middle East.

Into this darkness, destruction and despair God sends a word of hope. It is so amazing, so out of the ordinary that we are likely to dismiss it. It is beautiful to hear, but unreasonable to accept. The prophet Isaiah speaks to a people struggling to believe that

God has not forgotten them. It has been generations since they returned from exile and still the temple remains in ruins and life is not back to normal. We look around the world and know there are people today that share their disbelief. In fact, there are folks who think God has forgotten about them. Some people have stopped believing in God because they think God is not interested in bringing peace to the Middle East or Darfur or North Korea. We watch the nightly news and wonder why there is still so much pain and suffering, why folks are still homeless, why the mentally ill get lost in a cumbersome system and why children die of diseases that can be prevented with a simple dose of medicine.

Into this darkness, destruction and despair God speaks a word of renewal. We hear again the promise from the prophet Isaiah. It is an ancient promise and a timely promise. God says “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to an end. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating.” This new thing will be completely different from what we have ever experienced. No longer will we labor only to have it benefit someone else. Our hard work will not be exploited. We will all have a place to live and enough to eat and a way to educate our children and whatever we need to fight disease. God promises safe places to live and neighborhoods in which we would be proud to raise our children. We will not be afraid that our children will die from a waterborne disease that a shot or sip of medicine could prevent. No longer will we be afraid that the brother sleeping beside us will be roused angrily out of bed and disappear from our midst forever. No longer will we fear any of these things because God is doing something new.

This is a bold proclamation. How can this be? How can the world be entirely different, Lord, when we see so much evidence of war and violence every day? It seems so outrageous, so unbelievable, and so ludicrous to assume that such a thing could happen in our lifetime. Could we possibly live in a world without wars? Could we possibly expect that all children would be fed and free from crippling or life threatening diseases? God knows such a world is possible. God is not the reason these things have not happened. It is our disbelief, our inability to trust in God’s promises that keep this from happening. God is not some magic fairy that will swoop in and make these things happen. God expects us to be partners in this work for justice and peace. We have been blessed and gifted so that we might be a blessing to others.

Into this darkness, destruction and despair God speaks a word of reconciliation. God calls us to be God’s hands and feet and arms and ears and heart to create this new community. It will not happen until we accept that we are God’s instruments of peace. We do not trust we have the power to heal and reduce infant mortality. We have many ways to deny our power. If we don’t drive into Hartford we don’t have to face what it is like there. If we turn off the television, we can’t see how desperate things have become in other parts of the world. If we pretend there are no hungry people in Glastonbury, then we don’t have to feel guilty when our cupboards are full of more than we need. If the wolf can lie down with the lamb, we can find a way to bring peace to the world.

We are infinitely more powerful than we believe. God's promises are realized when we trust in this power. We don't have to go to Iraq or Bangladesh or Darfur. We can make a difference right. Some of you may be familiar with the One campaign. We were first introduced to this grass roots initiative a few years ago when the 9th grade mission group was coming home from our trip to New York City. A group of young people approached us in Grand Central Station. They gave us a white wristband with the word One on it. They explained that this was a campaign to eradicate hunger and poverty in our lifetime. It began with developing of the Millenium Development Goals and it has grown from there. It is possible for one person to make a difference, one voice can change the world, one dollar added to another dollar soon adds up to millions of dollars. I urge you to find out how you can become involved at their website www.ONE.org.

God offers not only a vision of justice, but also a vision of peace. Prophets continue to call us to a new way, a better way, a way of justice that will helps us to bring about the kin-dom of God. We can make a small donation to a hunger relief effort. We can contribute to the turkey drive so families in Hartford will have a Thanksgiving meal. We can support the One campaign and believe that hunger and poverty can be eradicated in our lifetime. We can take seriously the global climate crisis and make changes in our personal lifestyles. We can believe in the power of love and forgiveness and trust that even out of destruction God will rebuild the city.

We received an email this week from the Rev. John Thomas, president of the UCC. Last month he attempted to deliver to the president a pastoral letter on Iraq that many of you signed. The letter included more than 67,000 signatures. He was not allowed to do so and instead was arrested for failing to leave a no protest zone in front of the White House. The pastoral letter was the first step in an effort to minister to those who have been affected by the war in Iraq. During the season of Advent and Christmas John Thomas challenges members and friends of the UCC to do three things. First, he invites us to help raise \$100,000 to provide food, shelter, clothing and education for Iraqi war refugees and their families. Nearly 4 million people have been displaced by the war, 2 million within Iraq and another 2 million others have fled to places like Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. Our ecumenical partners desperately need financial support to meet the refugee's pressing needs. If you visit the denomination's website, you will find a link to respond to this effort.

Secondly, he urges us to find ways to support and meet the needs of our service men and women serving in Iraq. There are ways for us to show our care for them while they are away and ways to advocate for them when they return home. When veterans return home they have a variety of needs, both physical and psychological, many of which are being neglected. Thirdly, he invites us to join others by sending 100,000 of our own correspondences to our Congressional leaders urging a peaceful end to the war in Iraq. The pastoral letter was delivered to key leaders in Congress, however, Rev. Thomas urges us to clog the airways, email boxes, voicemails and snail mailboxes of our representatives to let them know how we feel about the war and about the leadership role they can play. These are three ways we can assist in building this New Jerusalem that Isaiah proclaims this morning.

Trust and believe that is the message I hear this morning from the prophet Isaiah. God will reveal a way to bring about the kin-dom in our midst. Will we listen? Will we trust that through prayerful and thoughtful participation we can build a New Jerusalem? God keeps nudging us, keeps revealing a new way. Sometimes it comes to us from unlikely places and unlikely voices. It has been so throughout the ages. Is Al Gore a prophet? Perhaps. Is John Thomas a prophet? Indeed. Were those college students prophets? Undoubtedly so. Who are the prophets among us? Where and when will the lion lie down with the lamb? It is time to listen, to trust and to respond. May it be so! Amen