A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*Hope and Meaning*

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Isaiah 65

There’s a church in Arkansas that has impressed me so much. It was our first stop on my sabbatical pilgrimage this summer. We ended up in several national parks, some of the most stunning country and coastline our beautiful nation offers from Maine to Washington, from sea to sea. But our first stop on our first day was a little church in the woods in Arkansas--made of glass. Not just a few windows, but the walls the ceiling, clear glass, supported by wood posts and trusses. Surrounded by tall trees and dappled light and changing weather. I don’t know how they built it. I don’t know how they maintain it. All I know is those few minutes in that space was the lens through which I saw everything else all summer. Amazing: a church whose worshipping life is lived out surrounded by God’s creation; a congregation whose spirituality is shaped by the beauty and challenges of the natural world. What a gift that would be.

I think Isaiah would have affirmed it, sharing God’s stunning promises: For I am about to create a new heavens and a new earth, and you’re going to be part of it. Not just part of it; you’re going to be central to it. I’m doing this for you and with you. I’m doing this, a new heavens and a new earth. You’re invited to join me and your brothers and sisters, wolves and lambs lying together, in realizing the redemptive dream for all creation living in shalom, in peace.

This is the exuberant message of Isaiah 65. Lift up your heads, lift up your hearts. We have work to do, good work, work that matters, that will last and will bless the lives of the old and the young--your generation and the ones to come and the nations of the world for a long, long time to come.

With this poetic prophesy, we come full circle from the creation and its fall in Genesis to its re-creation. Here we see the poetry of dawn of hope. And God knows, we need it. This is the kind of word we need when it seems like the world is falling apart. We face serious challenges today that can seem like the world is doomed. So did they.

Those folks back then lived through dark, desperate times, those ancient Israelites. In 586 BC, Jerusalem was sacked by the Babylonian armies, which then marched the inhabitants of Jerusalem across the desert to Babylon, where they were exiled for over 70 years.

The biblical prophets weren’t particularly sympathetic as all this unfolded. “It’s your own fault,” they would tell them over and over. It’s your own fault. You didn’t live in the way of God. You didn’t live in justice or in mercy with your neighbor. You didn’t respect the land and your place in it. You carved idols out of wood and stone and made yourselves gods, and this is the result. Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos . . .these weren’t comforting counselors much of the time. These were searing words of indictment, clear-eyed truth telling. You got yourself into this mess.

The Bible has a startling way of telling uncomfortable truth, believing that people need the truth and that they are actually capable of hearing it. There’s not a lot of sugar sometimes in the spoonful of medicine that the disciples prescribe. As their exile began, the prophets said to them, you will hear some people say peace, peace, but there is no peace. There is hope, but for now, the night will grow darker before a new dawn. The Jerusalem they were forced to walk away from was devastated. Temple torn down, walls in crumbles, vineyards trampled, crops withering in the fields. Their lives were ruined. That’s what everyone would say. Their lives were ruined. “How can we sing the Lord’s song by the waters of Babylon?”, they lamented.

Eventually they were set free from Babylonian captivity. Returning to Jerusalem, their troubles were not over. The city was in ruins, the temple needing to be rebuilt; walls of the city down, vineyards trampled and they had few resources to tackle the problems. They had to summon courage and creativity to go forward in the face of despair. The problem was too big for any single person, even too big for all of them together. They needed divine intervention and they needed uncommon personal resolve. They needed to believe there could be a new heavens and new earth to emerge from the one they were staring at. From where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. It would take uncommon faith and uncommon resolve to see them through the challenge they faced.

We’re facing in this era a similarly enormous, heaven and earth sized, too-big-to-handle challenge in the face of which any single individual seems hopelessly, virtually helpless. For all the problems we may face as individuals and particular to each community, we’re bound together by an even greater challenge in this time. Even the carnival going on in Washington DC politics, however it turns out, is a mere distraction from the larger issues facing the heavens and the earth. This century will be remembered far beyond whoever sits in the oval office for 3,4 or 8 years. It’s the climate situation.

And if that weren’t clear to us before, it should be now. Embedded in a 500-page US Federal governmental environmental impact statement from earlier this fall was an assumption that the planet on its current course will warm by the end of this century far beyond what we’ve been hearing.

Until now, the thought has been that if we do all the right things, we can keep global temperatures from increasing more than 2 degrees Celsius, 3-4 degrees Fahrenheit over pre-industrial levels, and if we do that, then we can arrest and then hopefully turn back the clock on the problems this inevitably will bring about. But the situation seems a bit more dire than we thought. Embedded in a Trump administration report from this fall, to which I’m confident Al Gore’s hands were nowhere close, was the projection that average global temperature will increase not just by 3-4 degrees but by 7 degrees by 2100. And that this is, by now, virtually inevitable.[[1]](#footnote-1) 7 degree warming by 2100 isn’t even the more dire projection out there.

To be fair, no one knows for sure what’s going to happen. These are complex computer models based on incomplete data and projections of future climate science and future human behavior. So, no one knows for sure. Yet if this is remotely true, we’re in the beginning of a global crisis that ought to shake our attention. The life of every person on the earth will be changed, especially the poor and vulnerable. And the life of every creature on earth will be altered; few living creatures can adapt quickly enough to the kind of change that we’re beginning to see take shape.

But compounding the problem is: Who’s to blame for this under these heavens and on this earth? All the science, and common sense, point to human activity post-industrial revolution. That seems incontrovertible. But still leaves open the question: but who is to blame? Governments? Are governments to blame? They do set policies and can tip the scales on free market economies on energy sourcing and treatment of public lands. Some governments and administrations do a better job than others. The current Brazilian government has been content to let the rainforest be cleared and burned by companies who want to grow soybeans. Are oil companies to blame? Or coal companies? Should we blame them for extracting from deep within the earth the sources of energy that make our modern life flow? What about pollution from emerging economies like India and China where millions of people are being lifted from abject poverty, or fisherman who overfish, or timber mills who bring down old growth forests. There are almost 8 billion people on the earth now. Who of them is to be held responsible for the changing global climate the effects of which will change our common home?

We all are.

I’m reminded of GK Chesterton’s response to the newspaper which asked: what’s wrong with the world? He replied, “Dear Sirs, I am.”

What would the prophets say if one of them were here? I think it would be something like this: “Brothers and sisters, you have done this to yourselves. You were given the vocation by your creator of serving and protecting the earth like a gardener tending her garden; you were established as priest of all creation, delivering the goods of this bounty in praise to God. But instead of serving the world, you put yourself over and above it. You beat your plows into refineries and your pruning hooks into tractor trailers and you stopped looking at the world as a gift and started looking at it as a resource, and then you called it stewardship when you took anything you wanted because you said you needed it. The land was a gift, and you trampled it; the heavens were a blessing, and you dirtied them. Death by a thousand cuts, that’s the world’s bleeding wounds. Who did it? You did even though most of the time you didn’t even know what you were doing, you, your fathers and mothers or your fathers’ fathers and mothers.

“You didn’t intend harm, but it was easy to be comfortable with your machines and your technologies. You wanted the next thing and the next. And now the world is consumed with the need of people to consume—more food, more exhaust, more pavement, more wood from forests; as a people, a whole people you are living beyond what the earth can sustain. That’s what she’s telling you. The earth cannot sustain this number of people consuming resources at this rate to support the industrial lifestyle that has been normalized. This isn’t working and the cost for pretending like it will continue to work will be measured not just in a few degrees, but in dead reefs, melted glaciers, dirtied air, flooded coastal cities, extinct species. This is what it looks like to remake the heavens and earth made in your own image.”

I don’t know how welcome the prophet’s message would be. The prophets didn’t pull punches. They had a way of seeing the truth and speaking it, as hard as it could be to hear. Jesus, too, believed people needed to hear the truth. He told them what they could hardly wrap their minds around: “I am going to be arrested and tried and crucified and after three days rise again.” Not just that, he said to them a generation before Rome sacked Jerusalem: this beautiful temple is coming down to the ground not one stone upon another. He told them clearly: Christian faith has an enormous, underappreciated capacity to look reality in the eye, even if we weep. To mourn, and then to rise again. After telling the people they got themselves into the mess they are in, Isaiah isn’t done with them. Isaiah 65 is a ray of light in the darkest of places. You have hope. No matter how despairing things look, we always have hope.

To a people in despair, Isaiah insisted you must have hope and keep striving for what seems impossible to you in your own strength, but in God’s strength anything is possible. Of all people, Christians are equipped to look at daunting situations with clear eyes and lean forward. This is the essence of Christian spirituality. We’re a people made by stories of slavery and exodus, of exile and return, of death and resurrection, of darkness and light, martyrdom and witness. We are exactly the world’s hope for hope even in this century to come. That may seem strange; Christians haven’t exactly been all on the front lines of raising the alarms about the changing climate. But we can be because we’re equipped spiritually with the two key things most needed in a time of despairing crisis. Hope and Meaning.

My friend Kyle Childress is a good pastor. He shares a story from Jim Wallis about volunteering in a church homeless shelter around Christmas time. Jim says the church basement was decorated with banners and Christmas decorations. One of the men who lived each day out on the streets looked around the room and asked, “What is the good news anyway?” Jim said there was a long pause; no one knew what to say. Finally, someone spoke up from the back of the line, “The good news is that it doesn’t have to be like this.” Kyle’s church in Nacogdoches has over the years been courageous witnesses to the gospel in all kinds of ways. Kyle continues by saying, “Any church that stops leaning toward the ‘new heavens and the new earth, any church which no longer keeps taut the tension between the way the world is and the world as God intends it to be, is a sadly compromised and accommodated church. We’ve somehow got to keep before us the gap between the bad news or no news and the good news. There is some distance between God’s will for the world and the world in which we now live. There is stress between what is and what ought to be.”

We have hope. That keeps us striving forward even when we don’t know how in the world hope can be realized. We do have hope. We also have meaning. We are taught that what we do with our lives has eternal consequences and meaning for us, our children, and our neighbors.

There can be situations when the calculus is that “nothing I do matters so why do anything at all?” This is absolutely the reasoning we face concerning ecological issues. In the Government report I mentioned, they used the same logic. It was a National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) report, “written to justify President Trump’s decision to freeze federal fuel-efficiency standards for cars and light trucks built after 2020. While the proposal would increase greenhouse gas emissions, the impact statement says, that policy would add just a very small drop to a very big, hot bucket.” You see the logic? Because the problem is too big for one thing to solve, we don’t see the value in doing the one thing. It’s based in despair, not hope or meaning. It’s not partisan policy; it’s human nature. It’s the predicament we’re in. And it is logic on a national scale which is negotiated in every household every day. I could even change my whole existence, produce zero carbon emissions, walk everywhere, eat only from my garden, turn off my A/C, and at the end of the day it will change essentially nothing. We can all do it as a congregation, or a city, even a state, though that might move things. But even then little would change. So the question is, why pay the extra cost? We all face these decisions all the time: what car to buy, whether to pay a little more for farmer’s market broccoli. The decisions are woven through every aspect of our lives.

Christians do the same math. Is the juice worth the squeeze? Those are complicated decisions played out every day in everyone’s lives. We cannot extract ourselves from the complications that our lives are enmeshed in the global economy. We just are here, but standing here, we are people who believe that one person’s life can make a difference. We are people constituted to believe one death can change the world. Of course, we are. One person’s life, one person’s death can change the world. This is who we are. As Jesus people, you can’t squeeze that conviction out of us. What that means is that we are somehow not overwhelmed. We are able to find meaning in the smallest action; even when it seems like it might not make a global difference, we are able to delight in the goodness of participating in God’s redemption, even in the smallest of ways. Actually, it all starts right there, that’s what’s been lost. That’s hat we can help the world recover: delight in this world. A people who start there might just change the world for better. And so, somewhere . . .

There’s a young man planting a flower garden in the backyard to give bees nectar. And there’s an older couple shopping at the hipster farmers market meeting a local farmer. There’s someone sharing a ride, just one simple ride across town. And there’s the Bamburger Ranch restoring 2500 acres of central Texas land. And there’s the Creech Farm restoring old natural Texas prairie. There’s someone making small decisions to save a little electricity and there’s someone putting a solar panel on their home. There’s someone with her hands in the soil planting tomato plants and there’s someone committed to eating all locally sourced produce.

There’s someone taking time to watch a sunrise and pray, instead of rushing headlong, frantic, into another day. And there’s someone writing their representatives about protecting wilderness areas. There’s someone visiting a national park, and being overcome by God’s glory in nature’s temples, and there’s someone planting an oak in their yard that they’ll never see fully grown. And there’s a church worshipping through glass windows with their eyes wide open to the world around them.

We have hope and we have meaning. The world is going to need a lot of both in the years to come. The world is going to need a church wide open to the world, with all its challenges and all its beauty; it’s changing seasons and changing climates; it’s troubles and its hope for renewal. The world is going to need a people who can lead a consumptive, despairing generation to live in delight, in hope, with meaning for the beauty of and the renewal of the earth.

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1. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/trump-administration-sees-a-7-degree-rise-in-global-temperatures-by-2100/2018/09/27/b9c6fada-bb45-11e8-bdc0-90f81cc58c5d_story.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)