

“A New Heaven and a New Earth”

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Please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

Our scripture message last week was about focusing on the now, instead of worrying about the past or the future. This week's passages both seem to be about prophecy, so they seem to be about the future. I contend, though, that even these passages are encouraging us to focus on the present *because* of our trust in what the future holds.

Our New Testament reading this morning can be a little frightening, as it seems to predict a terrifying time. This is one of the parts of scripture that people refer to when they say that the end of the world is coming soon. They look around and see war, calamities, insurrections and they think that our current world sounds a lot like what Jesus is describing. I should add, though, that people have been thinking that same thing for about the last 2000 years. From the moment of Jesus' ascension, some of his followers have believed that he would return immediately and, thus, the world would end, soon.

But this interpretation of prophecy—this idea that the end is coming right now—can be damaging. It has caused some to focus only on themselves and the health of their souls, turning their attention inward, instead of outward to the care of others. It has caused others to focus on conversion, thinking that they need to get as many people to become Christian as possible before the end. But then they ignore people's basic needs for food, shelter, or clean water. Others have become frightened, literally storing up food and weapons to survive the upcoming calamity. This can be what happens if we live as if the world is ending.

The way we interpret prophecy matters because it affects how we behave. So it's a good idea to ask a few questions about passages like this, such as: What is at the core of Jesus' warnings about the destruction of the temple? If we read this passage in context, reading more of the chapter, we see that Jesus is seeking both to comfort and exhort a certain behavior from his people. First, he tells them that their redemption is near and that he and the truth that he teaches will remain forever. He says: Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Basically, he's letting them know that their faith is not in vain. No matter how bad things are now and no matter how bad they become, says Jesus, your faith will be justified.

But then Jesus goes on to tell them to watch and keep awake, saying, "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life." In short, because we can count on a future that is good—one where Jesus reigns and where, as explained by Isaiah, the lion and the lamb "shall feed together" in peace—we have a certain responsibility now.

And this is where I think our scriptures' messages become deeply relevant to us. For many of us, the now is really, really hard. Many people in United States are exhausted and worried all of the time, which weighs us down. Our lives are so, so busy! Whether we work, are retired, or are looking for a job, most of us find ourselves busy from morning til night. In addition, we're watching the news, concerned about the state of our country, concerned about the health and welfare of low-wage earners, the homeless, the elderly, and of children. We are worried.

The choir's song and our video this morning help us to see why being worried actually makes sense. According to Jeannette's powerpoint, 1.66 million of Michigan families cannot afford basic necessities and 24.5% of children in the Lansing area live in poverty. 24.5%! That is an unbelievable number of kids living in poverty!

When I see statistics like this, I tend to feel weighed down by worry and frustration. But this is exactly what Jesus is telling us not to do. Even in the face of cataclysm, we are being asked to rely on and take comfort in the truth that Jesus taught. And when we rely on the truth that scripture teaches, when we trust in the promises of Jesus and prophets like Isaiah, we also can live in and focus on the now to try to help bring those promises into reality. Isaiah says:

For I am about to create new heavens

and a new earth;

the former things shall not be remembered

or come to mind.

But be glad and rejoice forever

in what I am creating;

for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,

and its people as a delight.

They shall not labor in vain,

or bear children for calamity;

for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—

and their descendants as well.

The new heaven and earth are a blessed place for children. They will not live in calamity, separated from parents or hungry or homeless. They shall be blessed by God.

Trusting that this is going to happen, we need to live in the now, trying to help make it happen. And we are already doing a lot along those lines. This church provides Blessings in a Backpack, donates to GLEAP and the foodbank, helps with Habitat for Humanity and the Southside

Community Kitchen. This charity work provides a home, food, clothing, and supplies to kids who desperately need it.

But this good work needs to be supplemented by justice work. We, as individuals or even as a small church, can only do so much. Government policies and the decisions of large corporations, however, can have sweeping effects on the lives of children. I'm going to give you an example. For many decades, the city of Flint was thriving and was an especially good place to be a kid. They had a hopping downtown, excellent schools with fantastic after school programs. I work with a woman who has shared her story with me. She went to Flint public schools on the north side in the 1970s. She tells me that, although she was bullied severely as a child, she had a dream that she would grow up to be a professional basketball player. This was a pretty amazing dream, since there were no women's professional basketball leagues at the time. There wasn't even a girl's team at her school. But there was a boy's team. She tried out and succeeded. She played on the boy's team up through middle school and, finally, they started a girl's team when she was in high school. After that she was recruited to first one college team, then another, and then she made the U.S. Olympics Team! Eventually, she did play professional basketball and traveled the world.

She credits this success, partially, to the Flint schools. Although she didn't care much for academics, she was able to succeed because they had good after school programs and she had a good safe home, with parents who made good money at the GM plant.

My friend now helps to run a community center in the north part of Flint which provides tutoring and after school programs for the kids in north Flint. This center is needed. In fact, I would say that it is crucial to those kids because of the current state of affairs in the city. Flint has closed most of their public schools in the north part of Flint—that's the poorest part of town. My friend tells me that over 67% of the kids in that area live in poverty. So kids who are unfortunate enough to be born there, have to get up at 5 in the morning to stand outside in front of burnt out buildings to

catch a bus, which drives them to the other side of town to go to school. There, they get breakfast, but the schools are dilapidated and supplies are either out of date or they just don't have them. They also don't have after school programs, so the kids are put back on the bus and driven back to the north side when school is over. There are no music, no sports, no art classes after school. And so, private individuals have gotten together to create the community center.

That center does amazing work and is growing at breakneck speed. Their work is to be greatly commended, but it's also not enough. In the end, those kids still live in poverty, barely getting enough food to survive, many poisoned by lead, and many without a home.

So why did I tell you this story? How does this all relate? Flint public schools got that bad because of a combination of too many factors for me to explain here. The short version is that the city lost its tax base due to a combination of corporate and government policies, as well as some individual decisions (like white flight). And here's how this relates to my overall point: Because government and corporate policies can strongly impact parents, those same policies strongly impact the children—children who have no say in whether or not their parents make a living wage or can provide them with a home; children who have no say or control over whether or not their schools are well-funded.

We who live in the United States have enormous power over our government and over corporations. We vote for people who create and vote for or against policies that directly impact children. Likewise, we support corporations with our dollars, and those corporations can also have a direct impact on children.

What happened in Flint is not the result of any particular party—Democrat or Republican. Members of both parties are to blame. So this is not a sermon meant to condemn any one

organization of one person. It is a sermon that is meant to encourage our action as disciples of Christ.

Let us start to consider how the policies and corporations that we support through our voting and through our dollars affect children. What policies or legislation are being proposed that could help solve any of the crises that our children are facing—crises of housing, of education, of safe places to be, of medical coverage? Which companies have the best or even just fair labor and wage practices? Do you have time this holiday season to write one letter or make one phone call to support those policies? Can you shop only at the places with the most fair practices? If you're not sure which policies could be helpful, several members of our church are involved in social justice work and could share their viewpoint on the matter.

In the end, being a disciple of Christ means that we can't get bogged down worrying about the end of times and whether or not they are coming soon. The good news of the Gospel is that salvation is already assured. Being a disciple of Christ means that we cannot let ourselves become weighted down or paralyzed by worry, frustration or exhaustion. The good news of the Gospel is that Jesus is already working to remake a new heaven and a new earth. So, trusting in this good news, we need to focus on the present, doing what we can to bring about that new earth now, especially for those who are most in need—our children. Amen.