

Beginning Anew

One evening when the kids were young, we were sitting around the dinner table talking about the way things used to be in the good old days. When one of them asked, “Mom, when you were little, did you have pencils?”

Making a valiant but futile effort not to laugh, I told them, “No. Pencils weren’t invented till I was in high school, when I used to park my dinosaur right outside of homeroom.”

Those were the good old days. Playing outside in the falling summer dusk. Catching fireflies. Climbing trees. Playing ball. Riding bikes. Going sledding. Taking long rambles through the woods. It was a time of innocence. It was a simpler time.

In the good old days, there was no internet. No e-mail. No smart phones. No texting. No social media. No I-Pods or I-Pads or any of the electronic gadgets and gizmos that are supposed to make twenty-first century life more convenient—but somehow serve to make it more complex, particularly for those who grew up without such devices.

This contemporary world can be stressful. Sometimes there aren't enough hours in the day. Even children have full schedules. And it's no longer considered safe for them to have free run of the neighborhood. People no longer leave their doors unlocked. Things seem so different from the way they used to be. It's not surprising that we may wish we could jump into a time machine and go back. With nostalgia, we remember those days gone by. In the mists of memory, they were the good old days.

But were the good old days *really* all that good? The twentieth century brought a Great Depression. World war. The holocaust. The atomic bomb. And seismic change to the America that many of us remember.

Does it ever feel as though you're living in a culture—although it's your own native country—in which your values are different from those of a sizable portion of this market-driven society? In our day and time, when you read the headlines, you learn of greed and exploitation. You learn of pollution of the air, land, and water. You learn of climate change. You learn of abject poverty and hunger. You learn of the heartbreaking deaths of

children, from disease and even as a result of violent acts. You learn of horrific weapons of annihilation. And none of these things you learn makes any sense to you.

Because you are a follower of Jesus Christ, whose gospel is radically countercultural. And because you know the truth of his gospel, sometimes you might feel as though you're in exile. Sometimes, you might feel like a stranger in a strange land.

Today's words of Scripture, from Isaiah's prophecy, are written to people who feel like strangers in a strange land. Isaiah writes to the people of Judah. To members of a faith community who have been in exile. Who have been held captive in Babylon. Now—after many years—they're finally being allowed to return to their land. To their own land, where Nebuchadnezzar's armies looted and burned and destroyed their towns, their capital city and their temple; killed a great many of them and marched the survivors off to a far country.

The first hearers of Isaiah's words are a remnant of a people now returning to a homeland left nearly unrecognizable. A people returning to a homeland where little remains except devastation and ruin.

If ever God's people needed a word of hope, these were that people. And through Isaiah, that's exactly what they—and we—hear and see today. A word and a vision of hope!

Isaiah's vision of hope makes us think back to the very beginning. Genesis tells us that God is pleased with God's handiwork. God sees that the creation is very good. And so is God's desire for the well-being of every creature. Good.

Eden, too, is good. There, God draws near to the first man and the first woman. But when they eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the divine-human relationship is shattered. Shattered by disobedience. Disobedience that has consequences.

For God says to the man: *From this day forward, your work will no longer be satisfying, but frustrating. You'll toil to bring food from the ground. Amid thistles and thorns you'll labor and sweat. Hardship will be your constant companion as you struggle to produce bread to eat.* And so, it came to pass.

God speaks also to the woman: *What is this that you have done? From this day forward, you will have pain in childbirth. For you, childbearing will be both difficult and dangerous.* And

so, it came to pass. In the biblical world, it's not uncommon for a woman to lose her life giving birth. And for every four babies born, only one would survive to adulthood.

Non-human animals, too, become at-risk. For at creation, God has given every green plant for food. But after the first disobedience, the killing and eating of animals by other animals—and also by humans—begins.

Brutality and bloodshed, conflict and cruelty have plagued creaturely existence ever since the sin of our first parents. Ever since one of their sons murdered his brother. But Isaiah looks to that day when there will be no more hostility and no more aggression. When swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. For God doesn't place the first man on a battlefield and arm him and make him a warrior.

God invites us to realize that God has designed our hands to hold not weapons, but tools. Tools that help, that build up, that provide nourishment. God takes the first human and places him in a lush and lovely garden. God's good intention for Adam is that he keep the garden. That he till the fertile soil. That he care for the earth God has created.

And that is God's charge to us, too. But we haven't done such a great job of it, have we? We know our world is out of sync with God's perfect will. And so we wonder: Will this world end in the mess we human creatures have made of it? Will this world's final chapter be written in brokenness? Today in the prophecy of Isaiah we hear God's answer: an emphatic, resounding *NO!*

We hear the answer. And if we have eyes to see, we can discern the signs. They're all around us! Signs that the old order is changing. Is passing away. We see the signs. But we not only *see* the signs. We're called to *be* the signs.

One of these signs is that we have the capability to stop world hunger now. We have the resources to help, to build up, to provide nourishment. Christian believers—United Methodists among them—have already started participating in this global effort.

And neighbors near and far are partnering to dramatically reduce the infant mortality rate. Fewer babies die. Through organizations like Doctors without Borders and initiatives like

Imagine No Malaria, work has already begun to end suffering and death from preventable diseases.

These are signs of God's reign, a reign that—although not yet fully accomplished—is already present in this world.

Part of the reason we know this to be true is that the creative activity of our God is not a once-for-all-time event, but an ongoing process. Creation isn't limited to the work described in the Bible's first chapter. The first verse of Genesis reads: "God created..." Actually, it would be a more accurate translation of the Hebrew to say: "God *began* creating."

Still today, God creates—all around us. The breathtaking sunrise of a new day. Trees aflame with vibrant autumn color. A flash of bright wings. A baby's laugh. God has created; God is creating; God will continue to create.

Today we hear God's own promise to create new heavens and a new earth. What will this new creation look like?

In Isaiah, it all unfolds before us. It's all right there. There'll be no more tear-stained faces. No more weeping. No more crying. This God who knows every need—who hears and who answers—will delight in a people who live in joyful

relationship with God and in *shalom* with one another. *God is about to make all things new!*

Spiraling violence will be no more. Even in the animal world, killing will be no more. In God's peaceable kingdom, predator and prey live together. Instead of *eating* lambs, wolves eat *beside* lambs—grazing the same pasture. *God is about to make all things new!*

No longer will the wealthy and the powerful profit from the toil of the poor and the powerless. As Isaiah puts it, people will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. Will enjoy fulfilling work and reap the benefits of their labor. *God is about to make all things new!*

The infant mortality rate will drop to zero. Babies will grow up healthy and whole, into men and women who live long and well. Who care for the earth as its stewards, until they're full of years. *God is about to make all things new!*

This is the picture Isaiah paints for you and me. A portrait of the good creation—beginning anew. For God has a plan. And the Bible is the story of that plan. God is absolutely determined that this plan *will* come to fruition. It's going to happen!

Everything will be just as it once was: The paradise of Eden, through the love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit. All will be restored to the garden's original goodness—beginning anew.

For the One who was present to the first humans—the One who *was* even before the beginning, who *is* now, and who forever *will be*—this One is with you in all the seasons of your life and draws you close through all time. This is the One who binds up wounds. This is the One who mends broken hearts. This is the One who is faithful. This is the One who is able. This is the One for whom nothing is too difficult. This is the One for whom all things are possible. This is the One whose promises are true. This is the One who makes heaven and earth begin anew.

This is your God who holds the future—a wondrous future! A future you lean into with confident hope! Be glad and rejoice forever in what your God is doing!

In the name of God the Creator, God the Christ, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.