

## **“Imaginary Places”**

### **Isaiah 65:17-25**

Sermon by Jan Edmiston

November 14, 2004

*Note: Isaiah was a Jewish prophet in the days when the Promised Land was divided north and south. Isaiah was from the southern kingdom of Judah. Actually scholars believe that this part of Isaiah (from what is often called “Third Isaiah”) was written not by the prophet himself but from one of his followers.*

I came across an intriguing book recently called *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places* and upon picking it up, I had the sudden urge to look in the *Hs* for “heaven” ready to accuse the secular publishing industry of calling our faith a fantasy. But thankfully “heaven” wasn’t in there.

There was Utopia, an island off the coast of South American imagined by Sir Thomas More in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. On the island of Utopia, all cupboards are full, all houses are fireproof, and all religions are tolerated. Utopia is not perfect though. There is still slavery and war and incurable disease.

In *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places* you can find Shangri-la imagined by Edgar Allan Poe as a place in remotest Tibet where the climate is always pleasant and people never seem to age.<sup>1</sup>

This dictionary includes Narnia and Lilliput, Oz and Hogwarts. But not heaven, and certainly not any place or condition called simply *the realm of God*. It only deals in the imaginary. Not the real.

\*\*\*

The book of Isaiah, on the other hand, involves some heavenly imagery, but the majority of this prophesy involves great turbulence. Real life, but more importantly the realities of life with and without faith.

From the time he was born and throughout his life,<sup>2</sup> the prophet Isaiah’s beloved nation of Judah was wedged in power struggles and wars and periods of profound misery. First Judah lived under the thumb of one of the great world powers – Assyria<sup>3</sup>. About 50 years later the Babylonians rose to power.

---

<sup>1</sup> Manguel Alberto and Gianni Guadalupe. *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places* (Harcourt: San Diego) 1999.

<sup>2</sup> See Isaiah 1:1. Isaiah was born in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century BC.

<sup>3</sup> These were the days of the divided kingdom: Judah (the southern kingdom) and Israel (the northern kingdom also known as Ephraim). When Judah would not join forces with Syria and Israel against Assyria, the Syro-Ephraimite War broke out. Assyria helped Judah fend off Syria and Israel, but there was a price: Judah became a vassal state under Assyria. This occurred in the mid 700s BC.

When the Babylonians conquered the Assyrian Empire they conquered Judah along with it, obliterating Jerusalem and destroying the temple that Solomon had built. It's said that King Nebuchadnezzar ordered his soldiers not only to *demolish* the Jewish temple; the soldiers were ordered to haul away the stones *far* from Jerusalem so that the Jews could never re-build their temple again. Many of the Jews were then exiled to Babylon where they lived as refugees.

It was from *this* time period that we find today's message – words written about 2500 years ago. But *imagine for a moment* how these words would sound to people listening *today* in the Middle East. It's almost as if nothing has changed.

It's 2500 years later and that same part of the world – now called the Palestinian territories and Israel – is still wedged in power struggles and wars and periods of profound misery.

But these words from Isaiah offer a glimpse of an alternative universe, a soothing image that offers hope:

*No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days  
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;  
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,  
and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.*

We all heard the wailing of Palestinians upon the death last week of Yasser Arafat. On the day Arafat left for a Paris hospital, a 16-year old Palestinian boy wrapped a bomb around himself and blew him and 3 Israelis in a dairy store outside Nablus. The Israelis retaliated by shooting a 12 year old who was throwing stones at soldiers, stating later that it was an accident.<sup>4</sup>

It is not unusual for young children to die by stray bullets in this part of the world. In Israel, bus drivers make more money than \$80,000 a year which makes sense. Being a bus driver in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv is one of the most dangerous jobs in the world.<sup>5</sup>

When the news is filled *everyday* with stories of violence and destruction taking place today in this part of the world, **can we believe this image that Isaiah still proclaims?** Palestinian homes are bulldozed with regularity. Illegal settlements continue to be built. A steep wall now separates many farmers from their own olive groves.

*They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant another eat.*

---

<sup>4</sup> Associated Press report filed November 1, 2004 6:28 PM by Gavin Rabinowitz.

<sup>5</sup> Article in *The Age* on February 14, 2004

<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/02/13/1076548214137.html?from=storyrhs&oneclick=true>

\*\*\*

**The truth is** that *not only* can a wolf and a lamb *not* eat together, but many Palestinians and Israelis cannot eat together either. God's holy mountain of Jerusalem is *not* a place of joy and delight. It's a place of security checks and gun-wielding soldiers.

And so how do we read this passage and take it seriously? Is Isaiah's prophesy simply a fantasy? Does his "new Jerusalem" belong in *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places*?

\*\*\*

If you ask a child what he or she imagines for the future, the vision is often glorious. In fact we *encourage* children to imagine greatness, to dream big!

Children who have grown up in loving homes, with people cheering them on, grow up imagining the fantastic: To be a fire fighter or a teacher, sure – but also to be President of the United States or a professional soccer player or the person who finds a cure for AIDS.

But as most children grow up they find their dreams knocked and battered quite a bit. They might come to a place where they can no longer imagine themselves being elected president of the senior class much less president of the free world. Sin and reality contribute to our failing hopes.

*As adults* we work to reach our dreams only to find that we are *also* knocked and battered a bit. We might lose our jobs or we might lose our loved ones. We might realize that we can never afford to live in a certain neighborhood or vacation in certain resorts.

Dreams change as we grow up, and especially **dreams change as we grow in faith**. We begin to imagine something bigger than our own glory. We begin to imagine that God can do anything and it's not about us. We begin to realize that God can even create a new Jerusalem.

With faith in God comes a vision for the future that is **more about God** and **what God wants** than what we want.

\*\*\*

Amir was a boy growing up in Afghanistan before the Russians and the Taliban. A glorious life lay before him. As a boy, his family had servants and luxuries. There were hills to climb and pranks to pull, and at his side was his very best friend, Hassan.

His only problem though was a universal problem. Amir's life was all about Amir. And something happened when Amir was 12 years old that impacted the rest of

his life. He committed a grave sin, a sin that changed the course of his life and the lives of many people around him.

He could not forget it, nor *should* he have forgotten it.

With each *day*, with each new *lie* to cover *up* his sin, things got worse. And just a short time later, ***everything*** came crushing down not only for Amir but for his entire country.

The Russians came. And then the Taliban came and life twirled into a hellish, terrifying existence. Amir became a refugee.

But years later, far from home, someone held up an image for him that could redeem everything: healing was possible. Forgiveness was possible. Even ***his*** sins could be forgiven.<sup>6</sup>

*For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;  
The former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.*

**All** of us find ourselves at the place where we need to focus on an image bigger than ourselves. Faithful people dream not of personal greatness, but of a place where God rules -

a place where there is no more weeping  
a place where the curses of our sins might be redeemed<sup>7</sup>  
a place where life is healthy and long and filled with delight.

**This is not an imaginary place.** This is God's promise to us of a "new Jerusalem."

And this is not merely a place that is far away. Here on the cusp of Advent, we will find in the coming weeks that God expects us to imagine this way of life NOW.

We have a duty as people of faith – not only to imagine a life that is bigger than we are today. We have a duty to bring glimpses of this life ***now*** – to seek justice and healing and fairness – all in the name of the One who lived and died **so that we might know what the realm of God looks like.**

\*\*\*

The great theologian Karl Barth once imagined that heaven is a place where the angels play Bach when God is around and they play Mozart when God is not around. C.S. Lewis imagined heaven as a place where cigars burn all the time but never run out.

---

<sup>6</sup> The story of ***The Kite Runner*** by Khaled Hosseini. (Riverhead Books: New York), 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah redeems the curses of Genesis. After Eve and Adam ate fruit from the forbidden tree, she was cursed with painful childbirth and he was cursed with meaningless work. Verse 23 specifically redeems this. See Genesis 3:16-17.

Isaiah imagined something more real: a place where no one would hurt or destroy on God's holy mountain ever again.

\*\*\*

What do we imagine for the future? What are we looking forward to?

A world where *we* are on top of that mountain? Or a world where *God* rules and inspires us to serve with great joy and delight so that *others* would also live with joy and delight as well? So that others might be on top of that mountain with us?

Thanks be to God who gives us *this image of heaven above* and glimpses of *heaven on earth below*. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit – let it be so.

**Let us pray:**

Holy and most merciful God – your love for us is breathtaking. Your capacity to forgive us and include us in your plans is amazing. With humble hearts, we ask that you might move us to live in peace with each other, keeping our eye on the One who lived this perfect life, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.