

Statements of Faith
Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19

Isaiah 65:17-25

¹⁷For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.

¹⁸But 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.

¹⁹I will rejoice in Jerusalem,
and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,
or the cry of distress.

²⁰No 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.

²¹They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

²²They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat;

for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.

²³They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity;
for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD—
and their descendants as well.

²⁴Before they call I will answer,
 while they are yet speaking I will hear.
²⁵The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
 the lion shall eat straw like the ox;
 but the serpent—its food shall be dust!

They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.

Luke 21:5-11, 18-19

⁵When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, ⁶“As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”

⁷They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” ⁸And he said, “Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them.

⁹“When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.”

¹⁰Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; ¹¹there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

¹²“But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name.

¹³This will give you an opportunity to testify. ¹⁴So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; ¹⁵for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. ¹⁶You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by

relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. ¹⁷You will be hated by all because of my name.

¹⁸“But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹By your endurance you will gain your souls.”

Prayer

God of majesty and grandeur and awe,
 Jesus our friend in the world; Christ our life and our goal,
 Holy Spirit our Advocate and Comforter:

Since earliest times, your people have wondered what lies over the horizon.

They gazed as far as they could in all directions
 and wondered what was just out of view.
 They watched the sun rise and set
 and observed the pattern of the seasons,
 wondering what the next day and the next year would bring.
 They saw themselves and each other
 growing and changing in body, mind and spirit,
 and wondered what the future held for them.

O God, your people have always wondered what lies over the horizon.

You bring us into the world and love us before we know who you are.

You watch over our childhoods,
 stirring our burgeoning imaginations,
 revealing a magical world of amazing details:
 from the faces and voices of adults who love us
 to the strange beauties of everything outdoors
 to the intricate workings of door hinges and can openers.

You stand beside us in the face of separation anxiety
and schoolyard bullies
and the wizening realizations that we're not the center of the universe
and that not much is permanent.

You put our artwork up on your fridge
and you brag about us to your neighbors.

In the tangle of adolescence, you understand us and love us
when we don't understand and sometimes don't much like ourselves.

You sit by the phone with us when we can't stop worrying.

When adult-world opportunities don't pan out that we wanted to pan out,
you're happy that we just dodged a bullet that we never saw coming.

When we start to slow down, you don't leave us behind.

When we start to forget, you remember.

When, as Leonard Cohen said,
our friends are gone, and our hair is grey,
and we ache in the places where we used to play,ⁱ
you are still the majestic and intimate God that you were
when we first learned your name.

Two things that make our lives sacred to us, and ease the pain,
are these, O God, and we are thankful:

that you always stir up in us the wondering of what's over the horizon;

and that along the way, we learn,
in our minds and our hearts and in our bones,
that the life you keep giving us
is richest and fullest and most joyful

when we finally learn that we can trust
that you never, ever leave us.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

The Sermon

Have you ever looked around and thought: Is this all there is?

Have you ever looked on circumstances that looked like the end of the world, like nothing could ever get better, like the problems are way too enormous and complicated to untangle, and thought: Is this the final word?

For us who believe that God is sovereign over everything that is and ever could be, how do we look toward a reality that isn't evident at the moment?

How does someone who believes in the goodness, the greatness, the omnipotence of God, look beyond whatever catastrophe seems to define the present moment?

How do you see *beyond* your present difficulty without looking *past* it?

By Luke chapter 21, it's getting late in Jesus' journey to the cross. He's called all his disciples and performed his healings and offered his teachings; and now he has arrived, and his followers have oohed and aahed at the Temple.

And I wonder if he looked at them—his friends, his pupils, his companions—and maybe he saw them as children again, and maybe it kind of tugged at his heartstrings that he knew they were still going to have to deal with schoolyard bullies, and separation anxiety, and the truth that not much is permanent.

And as they were marveling at the Temple, he said, “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”

And they said, “When? And what kind of sign will there be when it’s about to happen?”

And he opened up for them a vision of a world being shaken to its core; and he told them that, as servants of God, they were already a part of God’s redeeming plan in that vision.

For us who believe that God is ultimately, absolutely and eternally sovereign over everything that is and could ever be, how do we look toward a reality that isn’t evident at the moment?

How do you look for a reality beyond whatever catastrophes seem to define the present moment?

How do I access the reality of a future beyond the shame or the pain or the injustice or the frustration or the fear or the disappointment of my present circumstances?

Because I know that there is something greater than what I see around me.

I know that God created this universe good, and that it is still and always God’s universe; and *this* world, our world, may be tainted and broken and subject to tragedy, but there is a cosmic truth and an eternal beauty that are so much vaster and truer than what we think we recognize as reality.

In that long answer that Jesus gave the disciples about wars and famines and plagues and signs from heaven, and the trials that they would endure that would give them an opportunity to testify, he was speaking in terms that Bible scholars call *apocalyptic*.ⁱⁱ

Apocalypse has to do with the end of the human world as we know it, with its suffering and tears and injustice and inhumanity, and the hope of the world remade according to God's vision for it.

Apocalypse involves a rendering of God's judgment against those who deliberately inflict pain and suffering and loss on others, and in favor of those who have sought to be agents of God's love and healing and consolation and hope.

It's a message that makes great demands, which I suppose is the nature of messages that are more about hope than fear.

It came to the disciples the way apocalyptic revelation sometimes came to prophets in the Old Testament: as a fantastical glimpse beyond the catastrophes of the present moment into the truth of God's infinite love, in which the whole universe is saturated, and the tantalizing assurance that one day the pettiness and animalistic self-centeredness of our moment will give way to the vast and endless truth of who God is and what it is that you and I are actually here for.

How do you look to a reality beyond the heartaches, the atrocities, the pettiness of our time, without looking *past* them as if they weren't also part of our present reality?

In northern Europe around the year 1200, a group of Christian women began to come together called the Beguines.ⁱⁱⁱ Similar groups were coming together all over Europe and in other places.

The Church considered the Beguines a fairly dangerous group. In an effort to find union with Christ, many of them would put themselves through physical agony sometimes, and they were experiencing ecstatic mystical revelations.

Even people *at the time* who wrote admiringly about them would say, “Now, this isn’t supposed to be emulated—don’t starve yourself or work yourself to death or go to any of these extremes—don’t try this at home. But we need to be paying attention to these women, and what’s going on here.”

They knew there was a mystical world that someday would be realized in this one.

But in the meantime, they went out every day, all day, and worked until they could work no more to feed and care for the poor.

They longed for a mystical union with Christ, but in the meantime, they would give their lives entirely to meeting people trapped in poverty and feeding people who were literally, physically hungry.

How do you see *beyond* the smallness and meanness of our present moment without looking *past* it, as if it could be ignored away?

Two weeks ago, a 24-year-old man in Birmingham, Alabama on the way home from a party stopped into a Waffle House a little after midnight, and shortly after finding a table realized that there were about 30 other customers in the building, and a grand total of exactly one employee:^{iv} one guy to take the orders, cook the food, serve the food, handle the cash register, bus tables, clean the dishes, take out the trash, stock the restrooms, and keep the whole building clean. For 30 paying customers. His nametag identified him as Ben.

First of all, apparently a lot of people in Birmingham eat breakfast at 12:30 in the morning.

Anyone who has ever waited tables or had any other job that you needed because you were one missed payment away from calamity—especially a job in which you could occasionally get swamped—has had a recurring nightmare that Ben was actually living.

Those who were there said the look on his face was either fear or shock or bewilderment; I might add in anger, frustration, and the terror of knowing that even if everything goes more perfectly than it ever has before, this is still likely to be a disaster.

And after midnight, with a lot of hungry, paying customers, possibly some who are drunk, possibly some carrying weapons—this is 18 months after a mass shooting at a Waffle House in Tennessee—the words “potential disaster” don’t just mean an overcooked omelet.

The 24-year-old who had come in and found this scene noticed the employee, Ben, somehow finding a second to talk to one of the customers. And then he was surprised to see Ben hand that other customer an apron; and that other customer, a middle aged guy in blue jeans and a blue shirt, got up and started “bussing tables, washing dishes, stacking plates.”

Pretty soon, Ben came over and explained that there was some kind of mix-up: two other employees had left when their shift was over, but nobody came in to replace them.

Apparently overhearing that, a glamorous customer in high heels and a formal dress went behind the counter, figured out how to work the coffee maker, came back out, took orders, and started cleaning off tables. In heels.

That led to another guy in a red shirt getting up from his table and helping with the tables and dishes while Ben took orders and worked the kitchen.

Company executives later said, presumably with some embarrassment, that in the security camera footage, you can see customers washing dishes and clearing tables while Ben goes back and forth between the front of the house and the kitchen.

And for those of us who believe that food is always in some way about holy communion, and that the Lord's supper is always about all the physical meanings of food, I can imagine that caught on that black and white surveillance footage is something like the exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world.

Have you ever looked around and thought, "Is this all there is?"

How do you see beyond your present difficulty without looking past it?

Through the course of our lives, we experience the celestial majesty of God who speaks to us here in our mundane realities;

And we learn that God's kingdom comes in God's time.

And in the meantime, we learn how to speak the truth we know into a world that is desperate for words and actions of hope and peace and joy in the deeper truth of God's immortal, unlimited, uncontainable and undeniable love.

"For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth," says the LORD.

"Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating."

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ⁱ Adapted from Leonard Cohen, "Tower of Song" in Cohen, *Stranger Music* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 364

ⁱⁱ Information about the genre of apocalyptic is widely available. Fred Craddock discusses it succinctly and accessibly in Craddock, *Luke* (Interpretation series; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 243

ⁱⁱⁱ See Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, "New Styles of Feminine Spirituality—The Beguine Movement" in Petroff, ed., *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 171-178

^{iv} This story, including all details, comes from: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2019/11/11/lone-employee-busy-alabama-waffle-house-was-swamped-so-customers-jumped-behind-counter-help/?fbclid=IwAR0U1y4wVcpYP3YY5fRtaOXGTvTL8AZGwpOeemtYnmhGgB0txLOgRtZSYzA>