

***“Returning Home for the First Time”***

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, GA

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, November 13, 2016

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

**Holy Scriptures: Isaiah 65: 17-25**

*Theme: Just as the poet prophet challenged the Israelites before us (Isaiah 65) here we stand, side by side, surrounded by the leftover refuse of the parties and remaining rubble of the battle. We have arrived at the other side of a cantankerous federal election. The campaigns have raised valid and pressing issues/concerns and strengths/hopes. For better or for worse, the electoral process brought them to the forefront. In light of God’s Word to the Hebrews, what is God’s Word in such a time as this? What are we going to do about it? We have some choices to make, personally and together.*

**Isaiah 65: 17-25 (NRSV)**

<sup>17</sup>For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. <sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>I 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. <sup>20</sup>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. <sup>21</sup>They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. <sup>22</sup>They 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. <sup>23</sup>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. <sup>24</sup>Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. <sup>25</sup>The 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.

***Returning Home for the First Time***

This Word is a prayer of hope and love for a congregation and city  
that includes people from all walks of life.

We are from all points of the compass.

We are as varied and diverse a congregation as there is in this fair city of God.

We are a living testament that the Great Banquet of God  
is visible and buildable and possible on earth as it is in heaven.

Don’t ever take for granted what we have here.

Be proud, be happy about it, and keep working and playing  
as a diverse people united in the love of Christ.

Today’s Word was given to me as a gift from above for the whole people of God,  
a people that includes children of God

from a wide variety of viewpoints and persuasions,  
orientations and perspectives, backgrounds and future  
hopes.

What unites us into one people is the love and mercy of Jesus Christ.  
Here all are made welcome at the Lord's Table.  
Here we gather around the communion table  
with our varying degrees of religiosity, spirituality,  
political passions, means and motives, and personal gifts and talents.  
Don't ever take that for granted.  
We have something special here, and, trust me we are a model for the world.  
Here we pray and we practice as one church, linked by grace upon grace.  
Here we resolve to love, unite to serve, agree to differ, break bread together.

This past week on Election Day we were a polling place.  
Around 1,000 citizens walked inside to register their vote.  
That afternoon Quinn and I were at the front door  
when a father and his 20 year old daughter arrived.  
As a joke I asked, "Are you here for the prayer service or to vote?"  
"Both, I think," he said.

Listen once more to these passages from Isaiah 65.  
These words have been passed down across 25 centuries,  
repeated in oral traditions and on papyrus and in typeface and in song,  
and today they are offered aloud in our hearing.  
This poetry was spoken by a soul  
who took on the name of Isaiah  
out of respect and awe for the original prophet.  
This Isaiah was a younger man of faith;  
he had a way with words & a heart for the Lord.  
The poet prophet spoke to his neighbors as he trusted that the Lord might speak,  
as a Loving God might who was still speaking, still creating, still recreating.  
The poet prophet stood tall;  
he articulated God's empathy for the pain and joy, the struggles and triumphs  
of his people, his beloved, his community of faith.

He stood with his people in the rubble of Jerusalem,  
a once proud city now broken and torn asunder.  
They assessed their damaged homes, their streets, their relationships, their trust.

The poet prophet proclaimed:  
<sup>17</sup>For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;  
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.  
<sup>18</sup>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.  
<sup>19</sup>I 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.  
<sup>21</sup>They shall build houses and inhabit them;

*they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.*  
<sup>22</sup> *They 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. – Isaiah 65: 21-22*

### ***Returning Home for the First Time***

25 centuries ago, around 475 BCE,  
Hebrews returned home to Jerusalem, many for the first time.  
Several generations earlier their people had been forcibly removed,  
defeated in a terrible war with the Syrians  
an army that swept through and swept up the Hebrews.  
The conquering force cast them out of their homeland  
and sent them to the far reaches of surrounding lands.  
The scattering of the tribes of Israel was known as the Diaspora.

The time came for Hebrews to return and reclaim Jerusalem.  
Those entering were the great grandchildren of the Diaspora.  
They were fulfilling Ezekiel and Jeremiah' prophecies  
that one day, some day, with the help of God there would be a homecoming.  
They had been raised to be the fulfillment of this vision, this hope, this dream.

While back in exile they had heard their grandmothers and grandfathers tell stories.  
Stories of a glorious new temple set in the sparkling city of Jerusalem.  
Stories of how wonderful their homeland was.  
Stories of the olive trees and fruit trees and shade trees,  
of the rivers and cities and farmland, of safe places to worship and to live and to play.  
Surely life on that patch of earth was heavenly.  
They could imagine the fruit, the respite.  
Eagerly they returned for the first time to Israel.  
Yes, they had come home at last; home to a new home; back to a home new to them.

### ***Returning Home for the First Time***

Upon arrival they looked around...in horror.  
They had arrived, at last, only to discover...rubble.  
The city was in a shambles,  
and in their distress they turned their anger inward and against one another.  
Their disappointment ran deep,  
and the communal damage ran deeper.  
“Those who returned  
but now doubted the grand promises of yesteryear  
could hardly be blamed.” (W. Brueggemann, P. 597.)  
They had been on such a long journey,  
looking forward to this sacred place and blessed time of final arrival,  
so darn ready to let their hair down,  
to dip their toes in the river's edge,  
to pluck some fruit and sit in the shade,  
to put up their feet and lay aside their worries, only to find...rubble.

Rubble

What could they do with fallen rocks and odd stones and chipped bricks?

What could they do with dust and disappointment and damaged expectations?  
What could they do with the added stress and strain  
of feeling, thinking, living amidst brokenness?

Rubble

The poet prophet looked his people in their eyes and spoke the truth in love.  
He acknowledged their communally-shared perennial problems.  
Speaking once more as the Lord, he said:

*<sup>19</sup>I 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.*

*<sup>20</sup>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.*

The Lord saw and understood their problems, their deep-set challenges.  
They stood in the rubble and the refuse of the pain of infant mortality,  
the ache of loved ones not living as long as they should,  
the sting of being ignored, of not being respected or recognized,  
the throbbing injustice of income inequality,  
when some have to plant while another eats,  
of building homes that another occupies,  
the despair caused by the ravages of war  
and its concomitant tragedies inflicted on the human context.

### ***Returning Home for the First Time***

Rubble.

What were their options?

They could walk away from it.

They could sit and do nothing.

They could quit.

They could wait for someone else to do something about it.

They could complain about how long and hard it took to build  
and how in only a moment what once was standing  
was overthrown and torn down and undone.

They could roll up their sleeves and tighten their belts  
and look neighbors in the eye and choose to use the stones to rebuild,  
to clear a path in the rubble,  
to set aside the good bricks and timber,  
to build something new,  
to build something necessary,  
to build a new heaven on a new earth.

25 centuries ago

the poet prophet Isaiah and our spiritual ancestors  
stood foursquare in the center of a fragmented city;  
a city strewn with rubble and ruptured  
relationships;

a city in need of renewal.

Which way should they go? What should they do? Who should they become?

## ***Returning Home for the First Time***

The poet prophet was transfigured into a mouthpiece for the Holy One.  
He was convicted with hope.  
Fear not! Be not afraid!  
Sing a new song, a song of a new city.  
Sing of a new Jerusalem that shall emerge out of the rubble and refuse,  
    a new Jerusalem built not of bricks and mortar but of the human heart.  
Sing of a new Jerusalem that will be a joy, a delight,  
    a new heaven and a new earth.

25 centuries ago the poet prophet spoke truth and reconciliation to his people.  
They did not all agree; they did not all see eye to eye.  
They did not all speak the same dialect or dress alike or think in unison.  
Rumor has it that of those who returned from the Diaspora,  
    26% wanted to go one way, 26% wanted to go another, & 46% didn't show up.  
The poet prophet was direct:  
You are standing in the same city looking at the same rubble.  
You have the power to choose.  
You have the power to choose to sing, and to sing a new song together.  
Choose your attitude.  
Choose your actions.

If rubble is what you have, said the poet prophet, then out of the rubble find stones.  
With these stones you can throw them at each other or you can rebuild.  
You are standing foursquare in the midst of the rubble of a divided land,  
    and you have the power to do something about it.  
Something positive  
Something that is life-long and lasts  
Something that gives glory to God  
Build where you are planted.  
Plant seeds for tomorrow and the next generations to be born.  
It takes three years for grape vines to bear fruit,  
    nine years for olive trees to produce, and 20 for an oak tree to make one  
acorn.  
Get busy; get busy as E Pluribus Unum.  
Become involved, become inclusive, or become irrelevant.

*"Cavemen didn't invent fire because they were comfortable."*

You have the power to decide, to act, to commit,  
    to be fully engaged, to live and work in community,  
        to foster healthy relationships and practice an ever deepening faith.  
You have this power.  
Put your back into it.  
Put your money where your priorities are.  
Put your all in all.

## ***Returning Home for the First Time***

Let's bring it on home; let's move forward 25 centuries to 2016.  
We are returning home to America and seeing it as if for the first time.

Here we stand, side by side,  
    surrounded by the leftover refuse of the parties  
        and remaining rubble of the battle.  
We have arrived at the other side of a cantankerous federal election.  
The campaigns have raised valid and pressing  
    social issues and concerns, American strengths and hopes.  
For better or for worse,  
    this year's electoral process brought to the forefront  
        arenas that must be addressed.  
Just as God's Word to the Hebrews was contemporary and relevant,  
    God has a mighty Word to the Church in such a time as this.

We have some choices to make, personally and together as a congregation.

First, we are standing side by side in the midst of rubble.  
Perennial problems are real and clamoring to be addressed.  
The election results showed how many Americans think or feel  
    that they have been ignored, their needs unmet, their voices silenced.  
The election results shouted from the mountaintop  
    our collective level of distrust and disillusionment with institutions.  
How individuals feel about institutions, from the government to the church,  
    is child's play in comparison with how some institutions treat individuals.  
The election results highlighted our nation's intense racial divide, blatant sexism,  
    and rampant fear and misunderstanding  
        when it comes to homosexuality and human sexuality.  
The election results broadcast the fact  
    that so many of us share a dystopian view of America,  
        so many of us are cautiously optimistic,  
            and almost twice as many of us are apathetic or have given  
            up.  
The electoral campaign raised yet-to-be-dealt-with concerns  
    about college costs and student debt, the minimum wage, police and  
community relations,  
    income inequality, climate change, gun violence,  
        and adequate health care for every citizen  
            of this land we love so much.

Georgia Regional Minister Denise Bell preached:  
*"If we look to the government,  
we can only do what the government can do.  
If we look to education,  
we can only do what education can do.  
If we look to ourselves,  
we can only do what we can do.  
However when we look to God,  
we can do all things together through Christ who strengthens us."*

First, we are standing side by side in the midst of rubble.

Further, decency and respect appear to be in short supply.  
As we collect ourselves from this past week and prepare for the days to come,  
reports and incidents of people harassing people  
are on the increase.

From social media to college campuses,  
from small towns in the Carolinas to the streets of major cities,  
folks are choosing up sides  
and throwing at one another insults and stones and  
attitudes.

One would think that folks have been given permission  
to practice slights and slurs.

This is rubbish.

We need to rise above the temptation to practice hate and bigotry,  
and choose instead to love, to love one another,  
to see the light of Christ in each other.

25 centuries ago our spiritual ancestors had their backs against the wall.

They chose to put aside their differences,

celebrate their diversity, and affirm their oneness as the people of God.

What helped them to sing a new song in harmony?

Love.

Love one another.

First, we are standing side by side in the midst of rubble,  
so let us look to Christ the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

Further, decency and respect appear to be in short supply,  
so let us decide to love one another.

Finally, we the Church of Jesus Christ  
cannot do everything

or be all things to all people,

but we can do some things

and we can do them very well.

Let's start by starting with ourselves.

Only person I can change is me; only relationships we can adjust are ours.

*"If you change the way you look at things,  
the things you look at change."*

You have the power to choose the way you look at things.

You have the power to choose to sing, and to sing a new song together.

Remember what happened when Nelson Mandela became president of South Africa?

He could have succumbed to the pressure to imprison or cast out  
the Afrikaners who had oppressed him and his people.

Instead he asked Archbishop Desmond Tutu  
to develop the Truth and Reconciliation Project.

One at a time the oppressed and the oppressors alike  
were brought in to tell their stories, to unburden their pain,  
to share their memories and hopes.

Note my friends who helped lead South Africa out of the communal morass:

not government, not corporations nor polls or public opinion; it was the  
Church.

The Church modeled love.

The Church called people to speak and share their Truth.  
The Church practiced Reconciliation.  
And thanks be to the Church of Jesus Christ, a broken nation was healed.  
They sang together a new song, and we sang with them!,  
    a song of a new Jerusalem, a new heaven and a new earth,  
    a song that will be heard 25 centuries hence.

Good God  
    use us, we pray,  
    yes, use us and guide us and insist that we go forth together  
    to return home for the first time  
    to a homeland called Truth and Reconciliation.

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*