

DARE WE DREAM?

TEXT: Isaiah 11:1-9 and Rev. 21:1-7

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on May 22, 2022

While it's easy to get caught up in the Bible's stranger visions and stories of brutality and violence, the dream of a future when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven is both clear and compelling. You just heard versions of it from both the Old and New Testaments, with the details of each of them reflecting the age in which they were written. The first, from Isaiah 11, is a pastoral scene on a mountain, with predator and prey enjoying peaceful co-existence. It reflects the more rural and nomadic lifestyle of Israel about 800 years before the birth of Jesus.

The second, at the end of the book of Revelation, was written almost a thousand years later and reflects a time when Israel was centered around urban life, kingship, wealth, and the protection of city walls. In that vision, a new Jerusalem descends with none other than God as the king and light of the city with its gem-encrusted gates and streets paved with gold. While those settings are very different, the essence of what they promise is the same: Peace, healing, and rest from the ravages of oppression and wickedness.

For about a month now we've been talking about how we engage with God's work of turning death into life; and none of it is easy. Visions like those presented in Isaiah and Revelation put enticing meat on the bones of what that new life might look like if we keep at it, so that we can stay motivated and on the path. Although we think of them as portraying an other-worldly heaven, they are not primarily about what awaits us in an afterlife. Those who heard Isaiah's vision didn't even believe in an afterlife as we think of it. That was not a settled question in Jesus' day either, and the Bible shows us that the various sects of Judaism argued about whether souls experienced any kind of resurrection after death or not.

These visions are presented as promises from God of what we could experience in this life, if everyone got with the program. But they are more than just a promised reward. They also can be used as a yardstick to measure our progress. Jesus said that those who speak and live truly are known by their fruit. Visions of peaceful, non-violent, happy communities provide a concrete way to measure the fruit produced by our way of life. As the communities around us—family, church, civic group, town, nation—evolve and change, are they becoming more like these visions or less? If we're moving in the wrong direction, it's time for self-reflection and reform.

That's the big picture and it's not wrong. In order to do anything hard, we need a compelling vision of why it matters. We need to know that our actions have meaning and purpose if we are to stay engaged in hard things. We also need a way to measure our progress, and it's impossible to know if we're moving in the right direction if we have no idea where we're going. But they are not above criticism and, like the Bible more generally, we can get in trouble if we just look at passages in isolation.

As I mentioned, while the two visions reflect the nature of life in their respective eras and geographies, they have common themes of everyone getting along peacefully, equal treatment, no pain or suffering, and righteous rule. But to achieve that, in both visions, there are those who must be excluded. In both visions, the wicked are destroyed, which is what allows the peaceful vision to exist for more than twenty seconds. And it doesn't take much more than twenty seconds to realize that who gets to identify and judge someone as wicked is key to whether these visions are motivating or terrifying.

The white nationalist who drove 200 miles to reach a predominantly black neighborhood to gun down as many black people as he could in a Buffalo, NY grocery store last weekend was motivated by a vision with almost all of the same characteristics as the visions in Isaiah and Revelation. So were most of those who stormed the Capitol during the January 6 insurrection; many of whom are tied to white nationalist and white supremacist groups.

But although a disturbingly large percentage of them are not just white nationalists, but white Christian nationalists, they have missed a key part of these visions. And that is the identity and nature of the judge that decides who is allowed onto the holy mountain or into the holy city. In Isaiah it is the spirit of the Lord and in Revelation it is God directly.

Of course, they claim their views are the same as God's; a blasphemy that has been aided and abetted by the church since our nation's founding and is unfortunately alive and well today. Last week, when I said that the church has caused many if not most of its own problems, that is just one egregious example. And because we refused to nip it in the bud, white Christian nationalism is now a deadly problem for the whole country. I have news. God didn't die and leave white people in charge.

Any kind of nationalism or supremacy is a violation of God's commandment against idolatry. Moreover, in over 400 years of trying it out, it has clearly failed the "fruit" test. The more ascendant white supremacy becomes, the less like the visions in either Isaiah or Revelation the world appears. So that's one kind of criticism of these visions. When isolated from the rest of the Bible, their motivational power is open to distortion and abuse.

Another kind of criticism is that they set the bar too high. As someone once said, "If you want the wolf to lie down with the lamb, you're going to have to keep replacing the lamb." There's a sense here that if the vision is too idealistic that we will either try to force perfection through horrors like eugenics, which is another form of idolatry, or grow discouraged at our inability to actually arrive and give up. This criticism also has merit.

I used to think that I couldn't possibly be a perfectionist because—well—look at my house! But then I learned that, while it's easy to spot the perfectionist who will scoop up a speck of dust before it even hits a surface; perfectionism can also have the opposite effect. When I actually decide to clean something, it can take days to do a single room or even a partial room because of the drive to get it done perfectly. So, my more common response is to look at the mess, know I don't have days to do it properly, and give up doing it at all.

Given my tendencies there, I should probably have stayed a Baptist. As many of you know, John Wesley was the Anglican priest who started the reform movement called Methodism in 18th century England, and Wesley took perfectionism to new heights. In fact, he took them to divine heights and taught that perfection was attainable in this life. After all, Jesus said in Matthew 5:48, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Wesley was so committed to the idea of perfection that he asked every person being ordained as a Methodist, "Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?" The only acceptable answer was, "Yes."

That question outlived Wesley, and it was a question I had to answer at my own ordination, which resulted in many sleepless nights as the day approached. My friends advised me to just say yes and be done with it. But I wasn't going to stand in front of my bishop and the Annual Conference and say something I didn't mean. On the flip side, I also couldn't see how I could outlive the actuarial tables by enough years to make such an achievement even remotely possible.

The focus on achieving perfection did come back to bite Wesley, as the Methodist movement grew and some of its adherents started to claim that they had, in fact, arrived and were now perfect; claims that were hotly disputed by others. So, Wesley had to backtrack a bit to say that anyone announcing they had attained perfection showed a lack of humility, thereby proving they weren't.

But he didn't give up the idea; the language just shifted to focus on the process of "moving on toward perfection" rather than the goal of attaining it. That was also a better fit for Wesley's process-oriented theology of God's grace, which he saw in three parts. The first comes to us before we are aware of it, something he called "prevenient grace"; the second becomes conscious at the time we knowingly accept the faith, which he called "justifying grace"; and then the third goes on for the rest of our lives, moving us on to perfection, in a process he called "sanctifying grace."

Overall, it's a very comforting view of the human condition. Unlike traditions that focus on original sin and the total depravity of the unconverted soul; Wesley cast a vision for a life covered in God's grace—the grace that

surrounds and fills us before we're even aware of it, that nudges us along until the moment we recognize God's presence, and then continues to love and guide us throughout every moment of our lives.

But with that comfort does still come the expectation that we are not just coasting along. We are expected to participate in that sanctifying process and, in so doing, to acknowledge that we are moving on to perfection. And so I was still stuck with the question. I asked a lot of people—friends, colleagues, pastors, and professors; and they gave me lots of things to ponder, including whether my inability to assent to the question was an attack on God's sovereignty—isn't it God's work after all?—and whether I was too focused on Aristotle, who saw perfection as correct action instead of Plato, who viewed perfection as inner harmony.

I'd had enough therapy by then to know that fixing my inner state was not going to be a walk in the park either, but having the options laid out by the two philosophers made me wonder if one of them was closer to what the Bible, and more particularly Jesus, taught than the other.

Jesus does have a strong push toward right action. The only time Jesus weighs in on how God will judge our lives is in Matthew 25 and it's all about what we have done. The blessed are those who have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger, visited the sick and imprisoned, etc. And the cursed are those who did not. But when it comes to how a person actually develops the capacity to do those things, when it's much easier to do nothing, then the message of Jesus invites us to look inside ourselves. In the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-8, Jesus goes back to the Ten Commandments to point out that breaking of the commandments starts with the attitude of the heart. Hate leads to killing; lust leads to adultery, etc. There are also many examples in the gospels and the Bible more broadly of people doing the correct outer action for all the wrong inner reasons.

Most importantly, though, the two commands from the Hebrew Scriptures that Jesus combines and then names as the greatest commandments of all are both about love. To love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and to love our neighbors as ourselves. And I began to see that it's in love that Aristotle and Plato are joined. Love is the connective tissue between the inward heart and the outward act. It's love that allows compassionate action—even when done for the wrong reasons—to flow inward to change the heart. And it is the empathy of heart that travels the channel of love outward to acts of service and sacrifice. It's not the action OR the heart that defines a righteous act. It is both working together, each building up the other.

And then I saw that the question did not just say “Do you expect to be made perfect,” but rather, “do you expect to be made perfect “in love.” With that, I could finally see it. Whether I still screwed up outwardly or inwardly, if each thing could travel across the connective tissue of love, it could get fixed. Anger could be softened before leading to violent acts. Serving, even when I was resentful, could travel back across that loving connection and improve the state of my heart.

Best of all, I didn't have to—in fact I could not—manufacture that love on my own. It was a gift from God, given not as a reward for what I had achieved, but as the tool I would need to achieve anything truly good at all. I just had to be willing to download and install the software, and then it would run in the background. The love itself is perfect, because it comes from God. As for the outward actions and inner life God's love is trying to regulate, I still have to replace the lamb, but far less frequently than I used to.

I got up in front of the Florida Annual Conference and answered, “Yes.”

The Bible's visions of a better world can go off the rails in a number of ways. But the thing that keeps them on track is the same—the realization that it is, ultimately, God's work, God's judgment, and God's love. Not ours. That's just perfect. Amen.