

Seasons of civility (Isaiah 65:17-25)

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Here in Wisconsin, most of the old-timers can recall the good old days when Republican and Democratic state legislators carpooled to the Capitol in Madison. In Washington, DC, a few veteran lawmakers can remember a time when members of both parties entertained one another in their homes on the weekends.

Today it is bitter, intractable political warfare, in private as well as in public.

I'm a lobbyist; I serve the Wisconsin Council of Churches in the halls of the state legislature. A few years back I heard a story about a Republican and a Democrat from the assembly who, in a rare moment of bipartisanship, actually became friends. When one of them invited the other, along with his family, to his farm in northern Wisconsin for a weekend, his party leadership put its foot down. "We don't make friends with the enemy," he was told.

Isaiah 65 imagines a very different future in God's reign. To crown this new rule of God, the writer reiterates one of the Bible's most memorable images (found also in Is. 11:6-9):

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.

In this new creation, all animals are once again vegetarian as Genesis 1:30 suggests (not even the lion will be bloodthirsty), while the cruel serpent of Genesis 3 is reduced to a diet of dust. Even the vulnerable lamb will coexist peacefully with its natural predator the wolf. None of these "shall hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain," echoing the new world described in Isaiah 2:2-4--where "swords are beaten into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks," and peace reigns in God's world.

Like many American Christians, I long for this eschatological image of peace to take root in our politics. The public square has always been a marketplace of clashing ideas, the arena of competing value systems and the policy prescriptions that grow out of them. But the intense polarization of our era has turned the political marketplace into a toxic battleground, where political leaders who express differing worldviews are transformed into enemies.

Given our caustic political life, is Isaiah's vision of a peaceful public square a naïve hope?

Ulrich Mauser has said that Christian life is placed between history and eternity. It takes part, on the one hand, in the history of the world within which it exercises its faith; and it participates, on the other hand, in the power of the resurrection as the token of the new world toward which it is straining. All of this--history and eschatology alike--is bound up in the new creation echoed in Isaiah.

In 2011, protests erupted in Madison when Wisconsin governor Scott Walker proposed an end to collective bargaining for public employees. Sadly, within weeks, the caustic atmosphere in the state legislature had found its way into congregational life, particularly in small towns and rural parts of the state. The governor's proposal had divided families. Parishioners of different political persuasions were no longer on speaking terms. Friends were turning into enemies.

Religious leaders responded by calling for [A Season of Civility](#). The goal was to equip the community of faith to exhibit an alternative future--something different from the demonization we were embroiled in. Was it possible to bring Republicans and Democrats together in congregations to talk about their differences in a civil and respectful manner, and even learn from one another in the process? Parker Palmer and his Center for Courage and Renewal facilitators trained more than 400 pastors

and lay leaders in facilitation skills to lead small group discussions. About 100 congregations actually took part in the initiative.

To be honest, the Season of Civility project had mixed success. The painstaking work of opening up conversation with people who disagreed with each other was much harder than anyone expected. At its best, A Season of Civility was a humble and imperfect attempt to concretize Isaiah's vision in real time, to live in hope of a better future by practicing that future hope in the here and now. The nation's political life needs more of this from-the-ground-up experimentation.