

Sunday, November 17, 2013: Isaiah 65:17-25

by [Katie Givens Kime](#) in the [November 13, 2013](#) issue

In elevated, beautiful language God promises to create new heavens and a new earth. The problems and pain, the injustice and hunger, the longing and the loneliness—all will be vanquished! This image of predators and prey happily coexisting will appear again in the Isaiah text for Advent 2, and in Advent 3's Isaiah passage there will be “no lion . . . nor ravenous beast” in God's renewed Zion. But this week we have both: the reconciliation of predators and prey, and the vanquishing of the serpent (often the biblical archetype for the Evil Other).

This pastoral scene of predator and prey nuzzling one another is impossibly idyllic. It's as if we're watching a YouTube clip of animals doing preposterous cute things. We are fascinated and dismissive all at once. Our expectations, and even the laws of nature, are upended. Isn't this a scene that belongs in fairy tales or some “over the rainbow” land? Predator politics, predator institutions, predator bosses, family members, friends, strangers—what place does Isaiah's idyllic image of God's promise for us have in our real world?

I like Edward Hicks's depiction of Isaiah's vision in his painting *The Peaceable Kingdom*. A Quaker minister and artist, Hicks painted animals and children throughout his life. He also mixed in images of Quakers and Native Americans meeting together peacefully. But after the great American Quaker schism of 1827, Hicks's images were crowded with less peace and included more menacing fangs. Now he was beginning to paint reality, right?

One way of interpreting this text is to recognize the precarious powers (and potential for peace) that we all carry. Tending to our inner warfare—to the power-hungry lions within us that tear into our insecure inner lambs—is hard work, but in this way we join God in imagining our worlds, both inner and outer, both present and future, into hopeful reconciliation.

Pulling back the lens on this text, we face the larger question of God promising a reconciliation of all creatures. Questions immediately arise. *When* will God's new kingdom come, we ask? Just check the news, we add—justice is not yet reigning. The

people of God have already been waiting a long time, so is this prophecy an airy-fairy spiritual fantasy? Or if indeed God has a utopia in the works, why are we bothering to sweat and fret about anything?

Amidst problems of eschatology and dispensationalism, one gem to mine from Isaiah's articulation of God's promise has to do with the question of when. When will God create a new earth? In a couple of weeks? Years? Generations?

In the Hebrew, the ambiguity of verb tense has prompted a wide variation in translations: God will create, God creates, God is creating, God is about to create new heavens and a new earth. This is a moment when the original language offers us a fresh view. The timing of God's new creation is *ambiguous*, a word that comes from the Latin *ambo* meaning "both." God's new creation is happening both now and in the future.

Albert Einstein talked about the fluidity of "now" and "then." "The only reason for time is so that everything doesn't happen at once." If our God is unlimited by time, then perhaps this isn't just an intellectual somersault. Perhaps it matters very much that God's promise is both now and not now, already and not yet.

If it is true that each preacher has only one or two sermons, then perhaps mine is "both now and not now": the Christian task of bearing paradox. God is in us and not in us. Three and one. Human and divine. Holding opposite truths in tension with one another, rather than accepting one and rejecting the other, is one of the highest spiritual disciplines we ever face.

The paradox in God's lofty promise in Isaiah is that all *will* be resolved, and that all *is* resolved. The good news is that this frees us: we are not prisoners of our circumstances. The world is and shall be bigger than all the limitations we encounter in ourselves, in others and in the material universe of gravity, violence, aging, suffering and injustice.

There is only one command from God in this passage. "But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating." I love the echo in the Westminster Creed, which declares the chief end of humanity is "to glorify God and to enjoy [God] forever." When I heard these words in confirmation class, I objected. "Wait," I said, "the chief end is to follow the commandments and the Golden Rule, to be like Jesus!" My confirmation mentor smiled and waited for me to get it. "Oooh," I realized, "all those things *are* glorifying God."

Because we cannot control the future we fear it. We want to predict, control, explain and order it. What will happen to the addict daughter, the default mortgage, the shaky career, the Middle East, the Earth's ozone and all of the most vulnerable bits of God's creation? Living in the moment is a continual spiritual struggle. We spend too much time fretting about something in the past or scrambling to plan (control) the future. I sometimes recall a favorite 12-step acronym in these moments: "F.E.A.R. is Forgetting Everything's All Right."

Better yet, we can turn to Isaiah's words and be reminded that we are not God, and that God is bringing about more grace and goodness than we can imagine. In seeking nevertheless to imagine and to insist on God's intention for a just world, we participate in it, which may be the best news of all.