

November 16, Ordinary 33C (Isaiah 65:17-25)

In Isaiah, every promise of newness is an indictment of present brokenness.

by [Nick Peterson](#) in the [November 2025](#) issue

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In the early 2000s, the home makeover shows on HGTV and TLC had me in a choke hold. They always featured deserving families—communities rallying to rebuild houses outfitted with the latest technology, personalized bedrooms, special requests to win hearts. This was feel-good television at its best. You couldn't help but shed a tear seeing families move into beautiful new homes.

I feel a similar heart pull reading passages like Isaiah 65. The promise of what God is about to do attests to this aching longing that something isn't right about how things are. When God promises newness, we feel it in our guts.

But here's the problem with makeover culture: It packages transformation to maximize emotional impact without addressing the conditions that produce the need for it in the first place. These shows don't provide resources to sustain what's been made over. We bring similar assumptions to God's transformation, connecting with these texts' emotional hope without asking what God might mean by such transformation.

For example, if God created everything initially, what does it mean that God has to create again? Who damaged God's previous attempts such that creation needs a do-over? What vulnerability in creation requires it to be re-created? Third Isaiah emerges from the Persian period (538–515 BCE), when returned exiles faced harsh realities—economic hardship, social stratification, delayed temple reconstruction. The “new creation” language responds to the disappointment gap between exile's end and restoration's reality. The prophet writes not to triumphant people but to a struggling community whose hopes haven't materialized.

The key to understanding this passage lies in reading it like a photographic negative: The inverse reveals the intended image. The grand vision of new creation functions as the negative image of present reality. When Isaiah promises no infant mortality, extended lifespans, secure housing, and abundant harvests, he's also exposing a community devastated by premature death, economic exploitation, and food insecurity. Every promise of newness is an indictment of present brokenness.

This negative film approach becomes crucial when we reach the passage's final image: the serpent relegated to eating dust. While wolves and lambs feed together and lions eat straw, the serpent remains constrained to its ancient diet. Isaiah is in explicit conversation with Genesis, where humans are formed from dust (Gen. 2:7) but become living souls through God's breath. The serpent's curse is to crawl and eat dust (Gen. 3:14), and human death returns us to dust (Gen. 3:19).

Here's the theological breakthrough: If the serpent's food is dust, and death returns us to dust, then the serpent feeds on death itself. God's new creation disrupts death—promising extended lifespans, elimination of premature mortality, children not borne “for calamity”—and this disrupts the serpent's feeding. Deception is left without God-inspired creation to prey upon. The serpent can access only the dust dimension of human existence, not the life-breathed dimension that differentiates us from dirt. The hurt and harm come when we choose to

abandon the breath of life that separates us from dust—that's the avenue of deception that produces destruction.

Both Genesis 2–3 and Third Isaiah emerged from communities in theological crisis, grappling with questions about why covenant relationship failed and how to understand human vulnerability to corruption. Isaiah's explicit return to Genesis themes suggests mature reflection on the connection between death and deception. If death feeds deception, then conquering death starves the deceiver. The new creation isn't just corruption resistant but also death resistant.

Unlike the serpent, which remains static across both texts, the other creatures experience transformation. This makes our refusal to abandon our source of life—God—all the more crucial. The deceiver is not entitled to our life, even as deception makes us think we're entitled to our own lives. The life of new creation is affirmed by God's agency alone.

The failure of makeover culture parallels superficial readings of Isaiah: both promise transformation without addressing systemic causes or sustainable solutions. Genuine hope for systemic transformation grounds the most profound change in God's agency, not human capacity. Human agency must recognize its limitations and avail itself to a merciful God who alone saves us from ourselves and the forces orchestrating our demise.

Maybe that's exactly what we need—preachers and pastors willing to produce negatives, not as prosperity gospels but as indications of just how dire our present conditions are. If Third Isaiah's vision functions as the negative film of community trauma, then faithful preaching requires developing that negative in contemporary contexts. This means naming how present-day infant mortality, housing insecurity, exploitative labor, and ecological destruction reveal the same systemic failures that demanded Isaiah's radical vision.

The serpent's constrained presence reminds us that even divine transformation requires ongoing vigilance about forces that corrupt human flourishing. True prophetic hope uses God's vision not as escapist comfort but as diagnostic tool, revealing where present reality falls catastrophically short of divine intention. In this way, we learn to distinguish between genuine transformation grounded in God's life-giving power and the kind of makeover theology that offers emotional satisfaction while leaving death-dealing systems intact.