

Isaiah 65: 17-25
Luke 21: 5-19
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
November 14, 2010

This morning we hear two passages regarding Jerusalem and the temple in Jerusalem. The first passage comes from Isaiah chapter 65 which I like to refer to as “the third voice of the prophet. It is the time in Israel’s history following the return from exile in Babylon. Having built up beautiful memories of the city and the temple of Solomon they arrive to discover a pile of rubble. They are, needless to say, discouraged and overwhelmed. Yet they are called to rebuild.

Rebuilding is a slow task requiring faith, realistic expectations, and above all patience.

Faith is required because without it there is no possibility of success. The women and men who returned from Babylon had to believe that the God who brought destruction of Jerusalem would provide the energy and resources to rebuild. Nearly 600 years later the writer of the New Testament book Hebrews would define faith as “the assurance of what we hope for; the conviction of what we do not see.” Never more was this true than when the people of Israel faced a pile of broken rock and were asked to have faith that it would once again be a great city with a restored temple of the living God.

Faith is also important because, without faith we all too often succumb to unrealistic expectations. An important dimension of faith is that we not only *believe* God, we *consult* God on a daily basis. Because she did not consult Jesus about what he would want for dinner, Martha imagined she needed to make a five star meal and became

frustrated and resentful of her sister Mary when she did not help. His gentle rebuke of Martha tells us that she would have done well to find out what Jesus wanted. In the same way, without faith the people of Israel were faced with the tremendous and impossible task of rebuilding Jerusalem and the temple the way they imagined it had been before the armies of Babylon leveled it to the ground.

A healthy faith begets a realistic perspective. Maybe God does not *want* Jerusalem rebuilt exactly as it was. How does the work get done in a way that honors God yet has the prospect of success?

Thirdly, faith and realistic expectations bring about the gift of patience. Conversely, a lack of faith and unrealistic expectations beget *impatience* which destroys community. The people who returned from Babylon did not all the same gifts. Not all were strong and able to move the rock. Not many were skilled at designing new structures. Many were children. Many were physically limited by age or disability. Without faith that the rebuilding of the city and the temple was inspired by God there would be those who would have grandiose visions which no one could fulfill. There would be those who would poison the atmosphere with judgment of those who were not working as hard as they were. There would be those who would sabotage morale by saying the work was not going fast enough, was poorly organized. In no time the work would stop because people were angry with one another and full of, "If only people would listen to me." Or the ever popular, "I said this would happen."

Indeed the work did stop on more than one occasion. In each case the villains were a lack of faith, unrealistic priorities and impatience: in short, a failure to be inspired by God's vision and to consult with God daily about the work.

It is this situation that the passage in Isaiah addresses. This magnificent pronouncement is grand in scale. This is not simply about rebuilding a city and temple. It is about a new heaven and a new earth: A time when the former times (the present time, that is) will not be remembered. All life will be transformed. All people will dwell securely. Even natural enemies will live in community with one another. And in the middle of the vision God, through Isaiah says, “They shall not labor in vain.”

When the great vision comes from God and we respond in faith each of us is free to do our part no matter how big or small.

When the great vision comes from God and we respond in faith we work as a team. Because each is doing her or his part within the larger purpose of God there is no sniping. There is no jealousy. There no resentment. Each person has the joy of knowing that what they do matters.

And that is what finally happened. Jerusalem was rebuilt. The temple was rebuilt. And despite the inevitable ups and downs of history, by the time of Jesus Jerusalem and the temple were impressive and glorious: Too impressive and too glorious for Jesus; for he felt that God had been lost in all the glorious architecture. Thus he speaks of a future destruction.

Friends, in these two passages I propose that we are invited to reflect on two things.

Whether it is a city, an economy, an environment, restoring justice or a life, rebuilding is a difficult challenge. We look around us and are utterly dismayed. What good can come of this? Why bother to do the right thing? People are corrupt, the greed and powerful win; my marriage will never recover, there is no life for me after divorce,

the loss of a dear one, the loss of a job—you add to the list. It is easy to look at the battered and barren landscape and be overcome by despair. Rebuilding is difficult work. It is not for the faint of heart and it is almost never done alone.

Yet to us who are rebuilding, are facing a radical change in life hear the news. God has a vision. God is not overwhelmed or discouraged. God has a desire for you to be whole, well and full of a sense of meaning and purpose no matter what your age. God has a vision for us as a community which I do not believe we have begun to grasp. And everyone has a role no matter the age.

Those of us who have experienced God's faithfulness in the rebuilding of our lives cannot be impressed with the glory of our accomplishments. Instead we must provide constant encouragement to those of us who are discouraged and feeling lost in an impersonal and uncaring world. We need to be able to say, "If God can rebuild my life, he can certainly rebuild yours. That's why he sent Jesus."

My senior year in college when I had no clue about my future, a professor said to me, "Stewart, five years from now you will be doing something you cannot even imagine. Those words gave me hope and have guided me to this day.

Let me say the same thing to you on God's behalf. Believe. Whatever your rebuilding project is, let it become *God's* rebuilding project. Consult with him daily and be patient. For God is creating a new heaven and a new earth. And your struggles today will become "former things" which you may remember—but in a whole new way—as the birth pains of new life. Amen.