

The Persistent, Humble Lightbulb
A Sermon on Isaiah 65:17-66:2 by the Rev. Philip Major
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Desmond Tutu was an Anglican bishop in South Africa. He helped lead the native people of South Africa as they struggled against the violent oppression of apartheid. The struggle against apartheid lasted more than four decades, during which time millions of black citizens were forced to move from their homes, and thousands were killed by government forces. Bishop Tutu told a story about some of the worst years of apartheid. He would say a different sort of prayer, "Dear God, we know that you are in charge. Could you please make it a little more obvious?"

I thought of Bishop Tutu's prayer as I read our passage from Isaiah: *For I am about to create a new heavens and a new earth the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating.*

Here we come to the end of the story of Isaiah. Reading between the lines of the sixty-six chapters we catch glimpses of the history of the nation of Israel. At the beginning of the story, 750 years before the time of Christ Jesus, the northern kingdom was prosperous. There were many rich plantations, tended by the masses of poor people.

In chapter 66, at the end of the story, 500 years before Christ, Israel did not really exist as a nation. Much of the country had been taken over by foreigners. Some of the exiles had returned from Babylon to Jerusalem. The place where the Temple had stood was empty and desolate. The exiles returned to the homes of their grandparents to find other people living in them, harvesting the fruits of trees planted by their great-grandparents.

There, standing in a city where everyone was treating them as strangers, the exiles heard these words of the prophet: *they shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat.* As I read these words, I thought of the anniversary of Kristallnacht, the night of broken glass, we observed this week.

I read more of the words of Isaiah: *For like the days of a tree shall be the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity.* As I read these words, I thought of the young men of Russia, being sent off to war. I thought of the mothers of little black and little brown boys in America, fearing for the safety of their children. I thought of the prayer of Desmond Tutu. "Dear God, we know that you are in charge. Could you please make it a little more obvious?"

We are gathered as God's people in this place. Being God's people means being people who are persistent through the difficulties and disappointments of our lives. We may be the people who say the prayer of Desmond Tutu, yet we are still praying.

The story of scripture is our story. As the people of God described in Holy Scripture, we are a fragment. We are comfortable with our status as just a fragment, because scripture says we are to be a light that will bring light to the nations. We are striving to be like a lightbulb. We are a fragment, like the small group of exiles who returned to Jerusalem and were treated as strangers. It has always been this way for us as God's people.

As the people of God portrayed in Isaiah, we are people who participate in God's work of building a new creation. There are just two difficulties here. The first is that we usually like things to stay the same. The second is that it is difficult for us to know what is God's work. But we know God's work involves doing something new. And we trust God's work always involves bringing more love and goodness into the world.

God's new work outside the church has a tremendous impact on our lives. For thousands of years, men and women who lived in same-sex partnerships had no legal rights. This led to great suffering and pain for many people. When people were lying in hospital beds, dying of AIDS in the 1980s, their partners had no legal rights to make decisions about their care. These same-sex partners were sometimes forbidden from being with their loved ones at the end of their lives. All of that changed during the past twenty years as same-sex marriage was legalized across the United States. God is building a new creation in the world in our lifetimes. More love and goodness has been brought into the world through this new creation.

Four years ago, two men, partners for more than forty years, were married here at St. Paul's. Then they did something I have never seen before. They became members of our church. Two years ago, one of them was diagnosed with cancer. He is slowly but surely coming to the end of his journey back to his maker. This is a very difficult time for him, and for his husband, and for us, but there is less suffering, there is less pain than there would have been forty years ago, because of the new work God is doing in the world.

God is also doing new work in the church. That means some of the old things, some of the old ways of doing things, are being left behind. Many of the things we experienced in the church in our younger days were very good, but some of our old ways of doing things in the church need to be left behind.

Holy Scripture tells us that one of God's chief concerns is that people have a habit of using the words and language of faith in order to disguise their bad behavior. People have a tendency to engage in religious practices, like prayer and reading Holy Scripture, while continuing to hurt God's people.

The theme of the abuse of religious language and symbols runs all through the story of scripture. Jesus and St. Paul are constantly warning people about the threat of religious hypocrisy and the abuse of religious ideas and practices.

In chapter 66 of Isaiah, God is concerned about ways people have abused religious practices, including use of the Temple, in the past. So God will be doing some new work in the church. God is warning the people that God's new work will not look exactly like God's old work. God is telling them to not be so certain about the necessity of rebuilding the Temple: *Thus says the Lord: Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool. What is the house that you would build for me? And what is my resting place?* As chapter 66 continues the people are warned that there were many who brought bountiful sacrifices to the Temple, but whose hearts were filled with anger and hatred for their neighbors.

God's concern is not to rebuild the Temple exactly the way it was before. That was true in the time of Isaiah and it is true today. God's concern is not to restore the church to a previous time. God's concern is to refine the church. God's concern is that when people use words like faith, hope, and love they will act in ways that bring God's faith, God's hope and God's love to others. For God, the first problem to be rectified is the practice of taking God's name in vain by using it to oppress.

Eighty years ago, Karl Barth talked about the abuse of religious words and practices. Barth said, *The atheism that is the real enemy is the 'Christianity' that professes faith in God very much as a matter of course, perhaps with great emphasis, and perhaps with righteous indignation... while in its practical thinking and behavior it carries on exactly as if there were no God.*

People who use religious words for sake of oppressing other people were the central problem for the people of ancient Israel, and they are the central problem for Christians today. And so God is doing a new work in the church.

We find the same message in our Gospel passage. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus warns the disciples they will be going through a time of dramatic changes in their world and in the church. Like the disciples, we are living in a time of rapid changes in our world and in the church. God is building a new creation in the church. We do not know what this will look like.

In an hour or so, we will be sent out into the world, into a world that is changing very quickly. We will be sent out into the world as God's people. As we go out into the world, let's remember that we are a fragment. We are God's people, and we are comfortable being something small, like a lightbulb. It has been this way, almost all of the time, through the story of Holy Scripture.

And so we are sent out into the world as a people known for our deep humility. We remember we are trying to assist in God's work of love. We remember we are only God's helpers. We remember the words of Isaiah, this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit. We are God's people. We do not boast. We are not pompous and swaggering. We have humility about our efforts, and reverence for God's creation and God's love.

And so we are sent out into the world as people who are persistent. God says, look, I am about to do a new thing. And we respond, "What does the word about mean for the one who is eternal?" We know God's creation is going to take a long time. We are persistent.

And so we are sent out into the world, looking for signs of God's new creation. We strive to work alongside the one who creates us for the purposes of love, in order to bring more of God's love and goodness to the world. We strive to follow Christ's example of doing a new work of love in the world.

As we are sent out into the world, we are not surprised when we hear people using religious language and behavior to disguise their bad behavior. The prophet Isaiah saw it in ancient Israel more than two thousand years ago. Karl Barth saw it in Switzerland eighty years ago. We see the abuse of religion in our time.

As we are sent out into the world we see that, slowly but surely, God is building a new creation in our midst. Be comfortable with our status as a fragment. Be persistent. Follow the example of Christ in your humility. Be glad and rejoice forever in God's creation.