Scholars understand that the book of Isaiah was written by three authors to different contexts. This morning we hear from third Isaiah who wrote two generations after the first wave of exiles had returned from Babylon. They had found their beloved Jerusalem in ruins. They faced the monumental task of rebuilding a ruined city, a ruined temple, and a ruined nation. The rebuilding did not always go smoothly. The people faced many hardships and the returnees began to despair and turn away from God. The prophet Isaiah comes in the midst of their hopelessness, speaking on behalf of God, sharing a vision for their future. Hear the words of the prophet: Isaiah 65:17-25.

The people Israel are weary. Their ancestors had made the long journey home after years in exile in a foreign land. Second Isaiah had raised their hopes of a glorious restoration, but instead the people found themselves frustrated by multiple challenges. They knew of the former glory of Jerusalem and its Temple. Yet years after their return, much of Jerusalem was still in ruin, including homes and markets. Many people continued to suffer the effects of oppression and dislocation. Hunger, thirst, illness, early death, sorrow, economic injustice, and political turmoil were the realities of the day. The images we see of Aleppo in Syria are a modern day example of the state of Jerusalem at the time. Out of their despair and cynicism, the people started to forsake God and turned against one another. God became angry with them, but God remained faithful and repented of God's frustration. God remembered that they were God's beloved and set about to renew their spirits and their circumstances.

It is as if God is saying, "There is more to life than the present moment, the current struggles, the stress of this season. Far grander things are in store for you. Here is a glimpse of the goodness and peace I desire for you and all creation. I am still creating, and I can do a new thing among you. Out of the rubble of the past, out of the chaos of human endeavors, I am creatively at work. Here is the gate of hope; let's walk to the future together."

Through Isaiah God offers a divine vision of a world turned right side up. Here we see a future that is not on fire, but at peace. In this hopeful imagination, people of faith do not anticipate destruction but rather deliverance. Society will be transformed. The new Jerusalem will experience low infant mortality, housing
and food for all citizens, and sustainable employment. God goes so far as to envision new relationships between former enemies. The wolf and the lamb eat together at the trough, neither superior, neither inferior. In the Hebrew culture eating together was a symbol of hospitality and covenant. God envisions the predatory wolf respecting the vulnerable lamb. In the reign of God, relationships will be transformed and marked by mutual respect.

As people of faith, the vision of God proclaimed to Isaiah is also ours to claim. God's vision of health, housing, food, employment for all citizens of God's realm is declared in scripture. Christians claim dual citizenship- we are citizens of earth and we are citizens of the kingdom of God. Our citizenship in God's realm is instructive for our lives in the earthly realm. Through the promise that God is doing and will do a new thing, hope is kept alive.

This very day God continues to invite us, like the ancient Israelites, through the gate of hope as partners in bringing to birth God's new creation. Isaiah's vision gives us hints of that new world. We hear the call to right relationships for all God's people. If the wolf and lamb are to eat together in God's realm, we too must strive to respect the sacred in other human beings.

Our nation is weary after a bruising presidential campaign. The process and the election results have revealed raw wounds, exposing deep pain and hurt on the part of people across our country. Some have felt disenfranchised for many years and long for a change. Others are fearful that proposed changes will threaten their very personhood and well-being. We can identify with the people of Jerusalem, overcome by despair and cynicism. We are fumbling through the fog of anxiety and bitterness, desperately searching for the gate of hope which will lead us to God's reign of justice and peace for all people.

Where do we go from here? How are we as followers of Christ to respond to the deep division of our nation? Last week Parker Palmer answered that question as follows. "For me, the answer begins within, then moves out into the world. I must own up to my fears, confess my ignorance and arrogance, seek forgiveness from those I've wronged, practice humility, and learn to listen beneath my own and other's political rhetoric for what Howard Thurman called 'the sound of the genuine' in each of us. Beneath the shouting, there's suffering. Beneath the anger, fear. Beneath the threats, broken hearts. Start there and we might get somewhere."

"As we move from inner work to work in the world, there are myriad answers to 'What can I do?'- depending on who we are, where we are, how we are, and what's within our reach. Perhaps it's raising a child to be a caring citizen.
Or speaking up when the most vulnerable among us are maligned. Or sharing our resources. Or getting more involved politically or in serving our community or church. God needs our partnership in creating the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

Victoria Stafford tells of a psychiatrist in the health clinic at a prestigious women's college. One student known by the physician committed suicide in the dormitory. The healer held the loss very closely as any of us would had it been someone in our care. At one point, the doctor looked up in defiance and spoke of her vocation, as if out of the ashes of that day she was making a new covenant. She said, “You know I cannot save them. I am not here to save anybody or to save the world. All I can do- what I am called to do- is to plant myself at the gates of Hope. Sometimes they come in; sometimes they walk by. But I stand there every day and I call out till my lungs are sore with calling, and beckon and urge them in toward beautiful life and love ...”

That's a vocation for all of us; it is a vocation for us now. We stand in our congregations, classrooms, offices, factories, in vineyards and orchards, in hospitals, in prisons, in streets, in community groups. In our beautiful yet broken nation, we are called to bear witness to the possibility of living with the dignity, bravery, and gladness that befits a human being. We are called to plant ourselves at the gate of Hope as we prayerfully participate in ushering in the reign of God in all its fullness.

Richard Lischer received a business card from one of the oncologists at Duke University Medical Center. This physician specializes in the worst kinds of cancer. The business card of this world-class physician did not list a string of degrees and fellowships after his name. He only has this in boldface type: "THERE IS HOPE." Lischer has a feeling that it's the card that keeps his patients going. It's the card that brings them and their relatives back to his clinic again and again. It's the card that lifts their spirits when nothing else can. "There is hope."

God is standing at the gate of hope, beckoning us toward a beautiful vision, the vision of a peaceable kingdom described by Isaiah. We worship and serve a God who is larger than we are, a God who is more trustworthy than any political system, a God whose dream is sharper than our cloudy vision can imagine. Let us be courageous to seize God's vision as our guide for the future. Let us be bold to speak up when that vision is-threatened. Let us claim the compassion of Christ who embraces the forgotten and vulnerable. Planted at the gate of hope, we will trust that God will continue to create and do a new thing in our very midst.
O God, You have faithfully been our help in ages past. You are our hope for years to come. We come to anchor ourselves in your everlasting presence. In the midst of changing ways, you are a source of stability for us personally, for our nation, and for our world. Hold before us your vision of the peaceable reign, marked by mutual respect, concern, and dignity for all. Continue to reveal your path toward your realm of peace and justice.

We pray for President-elect Trump. Lend him your wisdom as he selects critical leaders who will help him guide our nation. Aid him in understanding the multiple dynamics of our treasured nation.

We are grateful for the service of veterans who have protected the liberty we enjoy in this land. We seek healing and strength for those who were injured during their service. Renew their families and the company of friends who support them. Guide us to use the liberty they have secured at great cost to build up the common good of our nation.

We pray for all who are feeling vulnerable or forgotten, angry or afraid. Feel with them, O God, sharing the depths of their pain. Offer the assurance of that they are your beloved. Lead them through the gate of hope toward renewal. We trust in your healing presence in our lives. We lift into your healing care those whom we know and love ....

We are grateful for the community of faith where we learn to love one another, to forgive one another, to respect those who differ from us, to care for those who are vulnerable. Revitalize the church of Jesus Christ, that we might be a beacon of hope and light for all your people.

In unity with Jesus Christ, we lift our voices together in prayer...

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