

WGUMC November 13, 2016 "Strangers in Our Own Land"  
Isaiah 65:17-25

We finished the series on Paul last week, so on Sunday night, I went back to the lectionary and found two choices for the sermon today: this passage in Isaiah about the new creation or one in the Gospel of Luke about the end of the world. At the time, I wasn't sure which one would be most appropriate for a sermon after the election, and I'm still not sure, because a lot of us don't know what just happened or how we got here.

If you live in California, you might have woken up on Wednesday morning feeling as if you were living in a foreign country. We all knew that California, especially the Bay Area, is different from other parts of the nation. We just didn't realize how different. What this election brought home to me is that a lot of people have been feeling like they are living in exile in their own country. And not enough of us have been listening to them.

Berkeley sociologist, Arlie Russell Hochschild, took the time to listen and has written a very empathetic portrait of some folks in Mississippi, called *Strangers in Their Own Land*. It should be required reading for all government officials and members of all parties, because empathetic listening is what we are sorely lacking these days.

At least we now know that we Americans all have something in common: we don't know where we are as a country or where we are going. And that is something we also have in common with the people of Ancient Israel who lived for so long in exile. They eventually came home, but it didn't feel like home anymore. The temple in Jerusalem was in ruins and they realized that things were not like they used to be and never would be. The Promised Land wasn't holding much promise for these returnees.

They had had such high hopes when they left Babylonia. But their hope had been replaced by disillusionment and

resentment, fueled by existential fear. And so they did what we humans always do when we're afraid. They went chasing after false gods that were making false promises and offering quick fixes.

The 65<sup>th</sup> Chapter begins with God watching them go: "I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, 'Here I am, here I am,' to a nation that did not call on my name. I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices; a people who provoke me to my face continually...." [65:1-2]

Because they made sacrifices to idols, God said, "...I will measure into their laps full payment for their actions." [65:7]

In other words, God is going to let them suffer the consequences. And don't we all hate the law of natural consequences!

This is how it works. In this election, we didn't vote for anyone. Most of us voted against someone. We voted our fears, which is understandable, because fear is about all the candidates had to offer us. But you know what happens when we vote our fears: The Trail of Tears; Jim Crow; the Chinese Exclusion Act; Japanese Internment Camps; the McCarthy Commission; overcrowded prisons; big walls.

FDR was right: there is nothing to fear but fear itself, and this year we looked into the mirror and again saw the face of fear itself. Where was the perfect love to cast it out? [I John 4:18] Not coming from the candidates or their parties, that's for sure.

Perfect love comes from God, and so the Prophet Isaiah pours his heart out to try to get people to seek out that love, believe in love. You see, God doesn't want to see us suffer the consequences of our fears. God doesn't delight in watching us punish ourselves. God is always there, ready to be sought out,

ready to be found, saying "Here I am, here I am." And God is always ready to create for us a new heaven and a new earth, even when we are not ready to live there.

Fear traps us in the old creation, one that looks too much like the one in Isaiah, where the city is in ruins and the people are in distress. In the old creation, we hear the sound of weeping. We grieve for lives cut short. We know people who are pushed out of their homes and families who have no food. We see people who labor in vain. We worry about bearing children for calamity, wondering how they are going to survive the global economy, global warming, and global war. This is the big picture we see everyday on our big screen TV's, but we see it on the small screen of our personal lives as well.

Fear traps us in what Richard Rohr calls our "life situation," that is, whatever circumstances we grapple with on any given day: what we worry about, obsess over, and try to control. All this is just our life situation, Rohr says. This is not

our life! If we don't want to live in fear, then we have to fall through our life situation and into our life. We have to let ourselves be stripped of the old creation so we can live in God's new creation, in the new heaven and the new earth.

We can't do that with an election, but an election can convince us that it needs to be done! And if we ever hope to do it on a national level, we'll have to practice it on a personal level first.

The day after the election, I woke up in fear and knew then that I had some personal work to do. Though I felt temporarily paralyzed by my life situation, there was one thing I could do: stop listening to the news, cold turkey. If I wanted to live in God's kingdom of love, I was going to have to exile myself from the media's kingdom of hate, from the politicians' reign of fear. Then I put on some soulful music and drove to the redwoods to see trees that have lived through worse times than these. Eventually, I came home and went to work and

surrounded myself with people who are also seeking the new creation. That's the saving grace of working at a church!

This is all I could manage to do this week, but there is much more work we have to do. To fall into our life and live in God's kingdom of love here in America today, we have to reach out to people who are living in fear. We have to listen to their stories and live inside their pain and learn what liberation looks and sounds and feels like to them. I pray that they will listen to our stories. Perhaps if we speak gently to one another, we can stop being afraid of each other.

Aside from that, we need to support our young people, because they have more life to fall into. On Tuesday, my daughter Kristen, who had been feeling hurt and angry about the way women and others have been talked about and treated in this campaign, cried herself to sleep. But she got up and went to school the next day. When I texted her to see if she was ok, she replied that she was already planning for 2020 and

was in an action mood, listening to endless Beyoncé. When she came home from school, she made an announcement: she plans to go into politics, maybe run for senator, and if there has been no woman president by the time she is 50, she will go for that, too.

On Friday evening, she got in a van with a bunch of other high school students from our youth group and went to San Francisco to serve meals to the folks at Glide, pass out lunches in the Tenderloin, and sit and talk and pray with those who are treated like strangers in their own land.

This, my friends, is the lesson that we Americans need to learn and we don't have to go to San Francisco to learn it. Open your Facebook page and reach out to that person who posts all those offensive political jokes or that family member who sneers at all things California. Befriend that sexual assault victim you met at the gym or the beauty salon. Reach out to the families of that undocumented immigrant and that Muslim

boy in your child's class at school. Talk to them. Listen to them. Love them. This is how we experience living in the kingdom of love, by inviting someone else in.

Now after every election people always talk about moving to Canada, but let me tell you that the new creation is not happening someplace else. It is happening right here. As Jesus said, the kingdom of God is among us, and our young people are the surest sign of it. And I can't wait until they are old enough to run for office. I'm voting for them!