

“New Heaven, New Earth”
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Isaiah 65:17-25

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Long ago in a land far, far away, God’s still, small voice was heard by Abraham, and his response was, “Here I Am, Lord.” So 3500 years past, a “wandering Aramean was our father.” He left home to follow the One who called to him, not knowing where he was going. And with his wife Sarah, a new family grew and thrived both in numbers and in prosperity. This new family lived close to the land herding animals and toiling the soil. They were dependent on each other, and they were dependent on the Holy One who day by day led them in all their ways. The One, whose voice was never far off, would visit their thoughts and be heard within their hearts. There were also wise ones, the sages and prophets, through whom holy guidance would be spoken and received. This family prospered and grew. Yet with prosperity came cause for discord and division: how to manage their prosperity, how to manage their society. The covenant that had bound them to each other and to the Holy One seemed almost inadequate to meet their growing institutional needs. Then they said “ah ha; we need a king (like the nations around us), someone to guide our increasingly complicated affairs; a king to make the rules for us so that life is fair.”

Though reluctant (like a parent would be) the Holy One conceded to their adolescent wishes and gave them kings. But these kings were very human, and the more the people listened to their kings, the less they listened for that still, small voice of the One who had first called upon father Abraham and mother Sarah. And the more they listened to their kings, the more the kings thought themselves worthy to be heard--in forgetfulness they spoke the intentions of kingly desires rather than the intentions of the Holy One. The more the people put their trust in the power of their kings; the less they remembered to trust the One above all others. They could see their king in all his glory (clothed in riches and crowned with gold); they saw the power of the court and of the military. And with all this “right before their eyes”, they became blind to the One who, though unseen, is source of all, the ground of all being. They had a “royal consciousness” which means their lives were focused around how kings thought in contrast to a godly consciousness with lives focused on God’s consciousness.

The kingdom of Israel flourished--at least for awhile--during a period of relative calm in the Fertile Crescent, in the years 1100 BCE to 750 BCE. Kings came and went. But these human kings were not powerful enough to protect their subjects against all odds. And so it was that in 586 BCE the kingdom of Israel was swallowed up by Babylon’s stronger king and bigger army. In defeat, they were forced to go into exile in Babylon and their labors became part of another nation’s economy and wealth. Israel lamented past times and lost homeland: “By the waters, the waters of Babylon, we sat down and wept and wept for thee Zion. We remember, we remember, we remember, thee Zion.”

As is often the case, when great turmoil strips away all pretense, out of the dust wisdom arises. First, presumptions are questioned. Then new depths of understanding attained. So it was for those living beside the waters of Babylon. It was in deep despair, that the histories of their past and that still, small voice of the One who first called them, began to be written and read. As the Word was gathered together, different nuances of the voice of the Holy were emphasized in accounts recorded from different perspectives. The multiplicity of voices gave a fuller and more complete divine Word. In

this foreign land, Israel began to allow their imaginations of the Holy One to expand. They now knew God was more than a deity belonging to one group of people, one small nation. God was *the* One, universal, God of All. God's role in history would not, could not be limited, no matter how much they might want God to be devoted only to them. And they began to realize that their kings had failed them mightily. Their trust had been misplaced and they had been betrayed.

Yet, there came a time when they caught a glimpse that perhaps they might survive. They heard the voices, not of kings, but of prophets, who again rose up to speak words of the Holy One, and the words of the prophets were words of hope and of encouragement. God is about to create a new heaven and a new earth, the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.

And so 50 years later (not very long in the course of human history), 50 years after the Israelites had been stomped into submission and exiled to Babylon, it is now Babylon's turn to suffer defeat by the Persian King Cyrus. King Cyrus granted leave to the Israelites to return home; though they would not have their own king, they could rebuild their lives; they could rebuild Jerusalem. The verses from Isaiah 65 which we read today are very likely words of hope on the road back and in the process of rebuilding Jerusalem. But it is not to be a rebuilding of the way things were; it is a new creation. It is a return to joy. No more shall the sound of weeping be heard, and peace is so profound that only a metaphor of wolves and lambs living together on the same grassland in peace could capture the imagination of this new creation.

The royal consciousness has been found woefully inadequate. God's vision, of a New Heaven and New Earth calls for a complete reorientation of Israel--so in tuned will be Creator and Creation that "Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear." Only metaphoric bliss can capture the hope that God's prophets extend to a people so loved by the Holy One. And in response to these poetic, visionary words of hope, the Israelite nation, found the strength to begin again and to reorient themselves to a godly consciousness that finds its strength not from king and army, but from the only serious source of energy: God of heaven and earth. Two intertwined realities new heaven, new earth comprise God's reality and God's blessing.

Like Israel in exile, today we long for a new heaven and new earth. It would be tempting to try to bring this about through our own power, such as it is. But we would only be deceiving ourselves. We cannot pre-empt God with our human designs and human arrogance. The only real power that truly can create new heaven, new earth is the power of the One, in whom the wise ones of history placed their trust. It is the power that pulsates in and through the universe; it is the very heart beat of the One, not thwarted by what appears to us to be defeat, death, or disappointment.

New heaven, new earth is the promise to those willing to wait, perhaps wait even in exile, to be still, and to listen for the voice of the One who long ago and far away called to our wandering Aramean father and mother and led them by the hand, the One who did not forget an exiled people living in despair, and the One who is still speaking to us today. The One calls to us, if only we listen, to leave human royal consciousness and to participate in a consciousness, an orientation towards life, that brings about new heaven, near earth. Can we hear the voice of the One? What will be our answer?