

The Resurrection of Our Lord

THE PROMISE OF UTOPIA

Isaiah 65:17-25

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By Steven E. Albertin

*17For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.*

*18But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
and its people as a delight.*

*19I will rejoice in Jerusalem,
and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,
or the cry of distress.*

*20No more shall there be in it
an infant that lives but a few days,
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,
and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered
accursed.*

*21They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.*

*22They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat;
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.*

23They shall not labor in vain,

or bear children for calamity;
for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD –
and their descendants as well.

24 Before they call I will answer,
while they are yet speaking I will hear.

25 The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;
but the serpent – its food shall be dust!

They shall not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain,
says the LORD.

My dictionary defines *utopia* like this: 1. An imaginary island described in Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) as enjoying perfection in law, politics, etc. 2. (usually lowercase) an ideal place or state. 3. (usually lowercase) any visionary system of political or social perfection.

The Greek origin of the word literally means *ou not + tóp(os)* a place. In other words, *utopia* is so ideal and perfect that “no place” like it could ever actually exist. *Utopia* is “no place.” The prophet's vision in today's First Reading seems utterly utopian. However, its place in the lectionary on this chief festival of the Christian year implies that the Resurrection of our Lord makes this promise of the prophet not as utopian it seems.

DIAGNOSIS: Waiting For Utopia

[This word from the prophet is an amazing and exuberant shout! It enthusiastically promises the coming of a *utopia* that will finally put to rest all the troubles of this world. The nature of the world to which this promise brings good news must be

implied and inferred from the utopian promises of this text. Behind the fantastic, utopian promises of the prophet lies a very bleak and disappointing world.]

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Utopian Disappointments

The prophet addresses a Judah that has come stumbling back from exile in Babylon. The temple and Jerusalem have probably been rebuilt but all was not well. The people were split into factions. Life has not returned to “the good old days” they thought would be theirs when they returned. Life back in Jerusalem was not the utopia they hoped for or expected.

Their plight is not all that unlike ours. Too many people die too soon and too young (v. 20). Economic crises and “bursting housing bubbles” snatch away our homes (v. 21). Housing foreclosures cruelly destroy a family’s dreams (v. 22). A recession might as well be an invading horde from Babylon destroying the work and the careers that we thought we could trust (vv. 22-23). It is a violent world where predators pounce on the weak and lions devour lambs (v. 25). We bring our children into a world in which everything is up for grabs, no one can be trusted and everything is in vain (v. 23). It is a world riddled with one disappointment after another (v. 19).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Utopian Tears

Like the recently returned exiles we are disappointed because we thought that such things would finally create a utopia in which our lives would be full and our hearts would be at peace. Children, a nice home in the suburbs, a rewarding career, a long life unburdened with suffering and pain, and a comfortable life where everyone gets along, even lions, lambs, oxen and snakes (v. 25), were supposed to be our reward for a job well done. But it never quite happens. Utopia never quite arrives. We discover that our trust was misplaced. We are disappointed. It breaks our

hearts. Tears flood our days (v. 19). Our cries for an explanation go unanswered (v. 24). We can count on no one and no thing. Our frantic attempts to find a utopia only seem to make matters worse. It is not only enough to make us cry, it can make us want to die (v. 25).

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Utopian Curses*

Disappointed and tearful there is an even more dreaded conclusion lurking in the background . . . for Judah and us. We will suffer the consequences of our misplaced faith and our utopian delusions. As the Lord and Creator of all that is (v. 17), God will not look the other way. God has answered our demands for an explanation (v. 24) with a curse (v. 20). Regardless of what we may think we have accomplished or achieved (vv. 21-22), all is in vain (v. 23). Utopia remains an illusion, unrealized, impossible and never to take shape in the world.

PROGNOSIS: Welcoming Utopia

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Utopian Blessing*

In the face of such a bleak situation and damnable fate, the prophet is delighted to promise the coming of utopia. The raucous enthusiasm of his announcement seems to imply that its arrival is near. The Lord and Creator of heaven and earth will not curse and abandon His prize creation, Judah. He will rescue it at all costs, even if it means starting all over again with the creation a new heaven and a new earth (v. 17). Jerusalem and its inhabitants will no longer resemble its current pathetic state of reconstruction. Instead, it will be a source of joy and delight to God (vv. 18-19). Lives will be long and fulfilling (vv. 20, 22). Careers will be meaningful. Work will be rewarding (vv. 21-22). The tears will have ended (v. 19).

These words of the prophet still would be wildly utopian if it were not for what we celebrate today: the Resurrection of Our Lord. The prophet anticipates what Easter finally creates:

utopia! The mountain on which armies of Babylon marched and brought their reign of terror became the mountain on which another empire, Rome with its religious collaborators, worked its terror on a rambunctious Galilean preacher who dared to believe that God had sent him to bring a utopia. They righteously cursed him and put him to death. They believed that God concurred with their plan until “the third day,” when God raised him from the dead and declared that this preacher’s utopian promises were not so utopian after all. In fact, the preacher was right and his promises were real. Utopia is not “no place” but present in “this place,” in this Jesus of Nazareth.

The Word and Sacrament ministry of the church offer Jesus and the new creation He makes possible. Nothing can hurt, destroy or undermine that reality (v. 25).

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Utopian Joy*

When God raised Jesus from the dead, God began a glorious new creation. Therefore, death no longer threatens to render any and every life meaningless. There will no longer be disappointment and tears (v. 19). Faith will not be seduced by the promises of some this-worldly utopia. God’s people will be filled with joy and delight because God has answered every cry, tear and disappointment even before they have begun to have a corrosive effect on our lives (v. 24). We know that we are chosen (v. 22). We know that nothing will ever be able to destroy or hurt our relationship to God (v. 25).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Welcoming Utopia*

Utopia is not “no place” but right here in this world in “this place” in the mission and ministry of the church. Through the daily lives of those who have staked their hearts and lives on the utopian promise of the risen Jesus, utopia actually begins to take shape in this world. We welcome utopia, fearlessly committing ourselves to living our daily lives building houses,

planting vineyards and enjoying the work of our hands (v. 22), certain that it will never be in vain (v. 23). We no longer have to live in fear afraid of the wolves and lions that would destroy us (v. 25). We no longer fear that death can destroy the value of our lives regardless of how long we live (vv. 20, 22). With this utopia in our midst, we can welcome into our world a new world where we no longer need to live in fear. What the prophet promised ("the world and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent-its food shall be dust") is not wildly utopian or some foolish dream. Through our daily lives we welcome this utopia into the world. When we do, the mission and ministry of the church continue.