

**“(Re)New,” based on Isaiah 65:17-25**  
**A sermon preached by the Rev. Elizabeth Smith-Bartlett**  
**at The Larchmont Avenue Church**  
**November 13, 2016**

I.

“It always seems like I’m precariously balanced between fear and hope.”<sup>1</sup>

These words are from Erik Weihenmayer, who is featured in a project called “Gratitude Revealed.” The project is a series of short films highlighting different components of emotional wellness that, combined, are the building blocks of gratitude. These are qualities like curiosity and mindfulness, and aims like connection and purpose. Erik is featured on the film about courage.

Erik is a mountain climber, a rock climber, and even an ice climber, which is exactly what it sounds like—he climbs up rock faces covered in snow and ice. Ropes and a harness support him, and uses ice tools in both hands and spikes on his shoes for added grip. Even with these measures in place, he describes the uncertainty of ice climbing, noting that he never fully knows if the next step, the next reach, is secure.

As if this isn’t courageous enough, I should also add that Erik is blind.

“It always seems like I’m precariously balanced between fear and hope,” he says, and then he adds, “You have to walk right in the middle.”<sup>2</sup>

II.

Isaiah speaks to the people in the midst of their own precarious balance. For context’s sake, Isaiah was a prophet in Jerusalem in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. At this point in Israel’s history, there were two kingdoms—Israel, the northern kingdom, and Judah, the southern kingdom. Jerusalem was in Judah. Scholars believe that the book of Isaiah reflects a significant span of history in the life of the collective people Israel...that the first 39 chapters were written at the time of Isaiah, and the remainder of the book—including this morning’s text—were written some 200 years later. In this span of time, both northern and southern kingdoms had been conquered by outside forces. There was a massive deportation of people in the Babylonian exile. The temple in Jerusalem—the center of religious life—had been destroyed, along with the city itself. After the fall of the Babylonian empire, the people returned to Jerusalem and began to rebuild.

It is into this precarious balance that God speaks a word of newness—of hope—of a radiant future that awaits them. “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://gratituderevealed.com/portfolio/courage/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://gratituderevealed.com/portfolio/courage/>

forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.”<sup>3</sup>

In this new creation, there will be no more weeping. The young will not die before their time. People shall build homes and live in them, plant vineyards and eat the fruits of their labor. It is a place of unending reconciliation and joy. Carolyn Sharp, who teaches Old Testament at Yale Divinity School, notes that this is a “poignant divine word for a traumatized community that felt God’s absence keenly during the exile.”<sup>4</sup> This vision of God’s new heaven and new earth is the glorious renewal of God’s people and God’s creation—it is *shalom* and healing.

### III.

It is this vision that was the cornerstone of Jesus’ life and ministry. Jesus’ first words in Mark’s gospel are these: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”<sup>5</sup> This new thing that God is doing—this new heaven and new earth that God is creating—is the kingdom that Jesus points to again and again and again.

He points to it in his teachings:

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom.*

*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*

*Forgive not seven times, but seventy times seven.*

*Like the Samaritan (the outcast, the despised) who showed mercy to another, go and do likewise.*

He points to it in his actions—healing the sick, feeding the multitudes, eating with outcasts, restoring sight to the blind, calming the stormy sea.

Repent, Jesus says. Ask for forgiveness, yes, but in order to truly repent, we must change directions. We must turn around, and go down the path that aligns with God’s vision and what God is at work doing in the world...the work of *shalom*, the work of healing.

Believe, Jesus says. Devote your hearts to this. Commit your lives to this good news—to this new thing, this renewal—above all else.

### IV.

I saw Godspell on Broadway, just a few months after I’d been ordained. I was listening to the soundtrack this week, hearing once again the story of Jesus’ life and ministry told through song. At the show’s beginning, there is John the Baptist, singing “Prepare ye the way of the Lord”. Then come Jesus and the disciples (the ensemble) singing various teachings and texts—

---

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 65:17-18

<sup>4</sup> Carolyn Sharp, Commentary on Isaiah 65:17-25  
([http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=678](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=678))

<sup>5</sup> Mark 1:15 NRSV

*You are the salt of the earth...  
All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above...  
O bless the Lord, my soul.*

The music is upbeat, the tunes are catchy—they make you want to sing along.

And then comes the finale. The music changes to angry electric guitars and the drama progresses, as the disciples look on while Jesus is crucified and then dies. The music pauses to mark the moment, and then a single voice begins to sing, slowly, mournfully, defiantly, “Long live God” over and over again. The others begin to join in on this refrain, and the mood begins to change, as the themes from previous songs intertwine. The disciples sing:

*We may not reach the ending  
But we can start  
Slowly but truly mending  
Brick by brick, heart by heart  
Now, maybe now  
We start learning how*

*We can build a beautiful city  
Yes, we can; Yes, we can  
We can build a beautiful city  
Not a city of angels  
But we can build a city of man<sup>6</sup>*

At the end of these words, the tune is triumphant once again, returning to the melody and the lyrics that began the show—“Prepare ye the way of the Lord.” The next chapter has begun. The disciples set out to continue the mission.

Brothers and sisters, following the way of Jesus means that we too join in this chorus, singing “Long live God”, “Prepare ye the way of the Lord”, and “We can build a beautiful city.” There are times when we sing this chorus joyfully, times when we sing it mournfully, times when we sing it defiantly. Following the way of Jesus means that we join God’s mission of newness, of renewal—of building this beautiful city here on earth—as we walk between fear and hope.

V.

The election and its aftermath this past week have confirmed what the campaign season pointed to—that we are a nation precariously balanced at best. We are a house divided, with many hungry for change, and many fearful of what changes in laws or policies might bring for them and those they hold dear.

---

<sup>6</sup> “Beautiful City” from *Godspell* by Stephen Schwartz (<http://www.letssingit.com/stephen-schwartz-lyrics-beautiful-city-updated-version-z22f5tb#ixzz4PqOtIsqM>)

Jim Wallis of Sojourners Magazine wrote this week that “Our call and our ministry, in such a time as this, will be both healing and resistance.”<sup>7</sup>

This ministry of healing and resistance was Jesus’ ministry too. It is a ministry that we must take on with deep intentionality as we look toward the future as a nation.

We must heal, for there is much healing that is needed. We must heal the wounds of disconnection. We must heal the wounds of feeling left behind and forgotten. We must heal the wounds that come from prejudice and oppression based on race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, mental and physical ability, economic class. We must heal systems that perpetuate wounded-ness.

We must resist, for there is much resistance that is needed. We must resist violence in all of its many forms. We must resist hardness of heart. We must resist rushing the conversation, seeking easy solutions or shutting out the voices that are different from our own. We must resist compromising the gospel message that Jesus embodied, that Jesus died for.

This ministry of healing and resistance will build the kingdom, “slowly but truly mending, brick by brick and heart by heart.”

Brothers and sisters, we are precariously balanced between fear and hope. Together, may we walk right in the middle, trusting God’s promises, joining God’s mission, following in the way of Jesus, seeking *shalom*, seeking healing. Amen.

---

<sup>7</sup> <https://sojo.net/articles/time-healing-and-resistance>