

Eschatopraxis: Living the Future Now

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Our reading for today is a fairly long passage from the book of Isaiah:

“O Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you, I will praise your name; for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure. For you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin; the palace of aliens is a city no more, it will never be rebuilt. Therefore strong peoples will glorify you; cities of ruthless nations will fear you. For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat. When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm, the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place, you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds; the song of the ruthless was stilled.

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain.” (Isaiah 25:1-10a)

“On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food.... Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces.... He will swallow up death forever. This is the Lord for whom we have waited.”

I think it is hard for Christians to hear these marvelous assurances of the prophet Isaiah and not associate them with the following vision of John in the book of Revelation.

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth.... And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals.... He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more.... Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life.... On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” (Revelation 21:1-4 and 22:1-2)

Both of these passages emphasize three things:

First, that God is coming to dwell with us and by doing so will ultimately close the gap between heaven and earth which divides us.

Second, this good and gracious God will provide food for all peoples, which will bring peace and healing to the nations.

And third, our good, gracious, and immortal God will wipe away death and the tears associated with our mortal lives.

Is there a better gospel message? Can we imagine good news better than this? I don't think so, and yet I still find myself wrestling with this passage from Isaiah.

I think we are too keen to read this text through the lens of the book of Revelation. In this last book of the Bible, scholars think John is addressing Christians in Asia Minor who have been or may soon be experiencing rising levels of persecution by the Roman Empire. My point is that John's vision is addressed to a group of people who are suffering because of their faithfulness to God.

Isaiah's audience is much different. As several other chapel speakers have pointed out, Isaiah spends most of his time condemning Israel for its moral corruption and religious idolatry. Most of the first 39 chapters of the book of Isaiah prophecy God's judgment on the people of Israel because they have not been faithful to God.

We catch glimpses of this message of judgment in the verses I read in chapter 25, but it is much clearer in the first few verses of chapter 24. Here Isaiah prophecy's:

“Now the Lord is about to lay waste the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants.... The earth shall be utterly laid waste and utterly despoiled; for the Lord has spoken this word.... The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt...” (Isaiah 24:1-6a)

Earlier this summer, when our campus pastors invited me to preach in this series on Isaiah, I had just finished reading several books on global warming and climate change. Even though I know that Isaiah's words were directed at the people of Israel and predicted their demise at the hands of neighboring empires, I believe his message of judgment applies to us today.

Just last week two major studies at NASA and the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory provided additional evidence that greenhouse gases generated by human activities are leading to rapid warming of the oceans and melting of arctic sea ice. If the growing scientific consensus about global warming is accurate, global climate change will likely pose enormous harm to future generations of human beings.

Scientists warn that rising ocean temperatures will lead to a larger number of increasingly powerful hurricanes, which, combined with rising ocean levels, will imperil the lives of fifty percent of the world's population that live within sixty miles of a coastline. Rising inland temperatures have already led to a sharp increase in new diseases, allowing old diseases like malaria to do damage in ecological regions where they have not wreaked havoc before. Significant climatic changes all over the world are projected to increase desertification in arid regions, increase flooding in wetter regions, and stress agricultural soils that are already sorely taxed to feed more than six billion people on the planet.

Listen again to the prophet Isaiah: "The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant." (Isaiah 24:5) Unlike many today, Isaiah recognized the link between the degradation of nature and the degradation of people. Eco-feminists have helped us see that it is the same "logic of domination" which leads to the exploitation of both people and the planet. Injustice has social and ecological consequences.

Those who ignore the lessons of history are doomed to repeat the errors of the past. Isaiah's warnings bore no fruit for the people of Israel who suffered the consequences of their moral failings and religious corruption. Will the same be true of us today? The vast majority of the world's social and ecological woes can be laid squarely at the feet of Western nations which have been heavily influenced by Christianity. Isaiah urges us to repent: to live in right relationship with God, with the planet, and with each other.

Martin Luther emphasized that the Word of God contains both Law and Gospel; judgment and grace. It is tempting to focus on the ultimate message of eschatological redemption in Isaiah 25, but to take quick solace in this good news will simply amount to cheap grace if we do not take seriously Isaiah's warnings in chapter 24. On the other hand, if we only focus on Isaiah's judgment we may become paralyzed by our guilt. So how are we to live in this tension between law and gospel, judgment and hope?

I think we are called to live the future now. Carl Braaten, a North American Lutheran theologian, calls this the prophetic call to "eschatopraxis." Ruben Alves, a Latin American liberation theologian, puts it this way: "Hope is hearing the melody of the future. Faith is dancing to that melody today."

Like the people of Israel, we look forward to that great day in the future when our almighty and merciful God will make for all peoples a feast of rich food and destroy the shroud of guilt and death which destroys us. May our faith in this future embolden us today to hunger for justice, work for peace, and restore the integrity of creation. Amen.