

The *kairos* of pandemic: Isaiah 65: 13-25

Jennifer Henry (with assistance from the KAIROS Leadership Bible Study group)
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This morning I have been invited to look with you at a part of Isaiah (65:13-25), from a broader section (63-66:16) that has an apocalyptic feel.

Here at the end of Isaiah there is an appeal to YHWH to intervene into a situation of extreme chaos, injustice, wrong doing. And YHWH does, to judge and to save. There is definitive bringing down of the old, even a forgetting (“the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind” 65:17) and the birth of a “new heaven and a new earth” (65:17) where “they shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit”(65:21). Children will live no more in horror but in blessing.

Why go “there”—to the apocalyptic—in this moment? In part, because the broader society is going there. When I walk down the street in my neighbourhood there is a sign in one of the stores: “see you after the apocalypse.” I am pretty sure this sign emerged more from the zombie, pop culture vision of apocalypse rather than serious biblical scholarship. But it is in conversation—the sense that in this pandemic something cataclysmic is taking place; there is the end of life as we know it. There is something about the chaos, the grief, the disruption that pushes people towards that larger scale kind of reflection.

In our scriptures, apocalyptic literature comes out of extreme oppression and distress--the need for an out of this world solution. We have learned that the word means “unmasking” or “unveiling,” and it has two parts. The first is a kind of judgement on what is, what in the biblical context is usually some kind of empire into which the people have become entangled. The apocalyptic lens is a kind of “xray vision,” revealing that in the status quo which is unjust, exposing suffering that has been covered over or denied by imperial/colonial thinking. What seems like judgement is validation to those who see and live life from this underside of empire. The second part of the apocalyptic lens is a kind of hopeful imagination—rosy glasses of metaphor, visions, and art—that dreams of a new world that could be possible, a world more wonderful than colonized minds can usually even imagine. My friend and colleague Ched Myers talks about how, for first world church folks, the first part of apocalyptic is usually too pessimistic (or critical) for our comfort and the second is too hopeful for our realism. This text has both. It starts with a disquieting judgement on the evil doers of the status quo (their sins itemized a bit earlier) and then reveals a idyllic future of right relations—not just between people—but with the earth.

To make a leap to our current day, it is my sense this pandemic experience can be like wearing a pair of apocalyptic glasses. These lens show us how we have **mis**-valued what is essential, in experiences, people, workers; how we have failed--our elderly and other vulnerable people. The glasses reveal the racism and violence that is not “cancelled,” and how we have wounded the earth—to name only some of what is being revealed. But at the same time these glasses, might help us in imagining a new thing. If we could change this much in a few weeks (some of it intentionally for the common good), could we not change towards justice,

equity and right relation in some kind of more definitive way. With God's help, is it possible for us humans to learn enough from this crisis to be a new creation?

I will offer three points which really represent kinds of tension (even contradiction) to start your own conversation in small groups:

- First: My sense is that how we take on judgement: are we the servants of God or the "you" of the first section (65:13-15)? And how we view upheaval texts—the disruption of the "normal"—has very much to do with social location. If we are very uncomfortable with the critiques of the status quo, with the possibility of the "old" being swept away, well, that is revealing isn't it. Perhaps the "old" was working for us. If we long for a return to "normal," perhaps "normal" served us in some significant ways. But what of refugees, migrants, minimum wage workers, victims of conflict, the hungry, the vulnerable? Normal wasn't working for so many of our neighbours. Normal wasn't working for the planet. Can we reveal what systems of inequity and domination propped up normal? Can we come along side those for whom normal never worked, and through their eyes, see what should be kept, but also what best be gone, to allow new things, to ensure new just things, emerge?
- Second: We want to be careful about how read—or explain—divine intentionality, particularly in this time. The pandemic might offer apocalyptic glasses to help reveal pre-existing inequities and injustices in our world, but what of the new suffering that the pandemic has created. We tend to avoid "God caused" kind of language, and work to interpret around it in our texts, even apocalyptic ones with metaphors of bringing down empires. But I have certainly heard "nature is taking her revenge." And, I am equally uncomfortable with that. How do we recognize the suffering that pre-existed this pandemic, and recognize the suffering caused by this pandemic—honouring the grief and the losses—and still lean into the possibility that this could change us, in positive ways? We *could* attribute or blame, or maybe put our best energy into learning—finding God there—stepping into that small opening, girded with whatever new compassion, grace and solidarity is emerging, and to go forward—not back—to a different future.
- Finally, I want to ask whether it is an either/or? In the judgement section of this text, we get to be "servants" of YHWH who will eat, or "you," the ones who did evil in my sight and who shall go hungry. That's pretty tough stuff and I want to put myself in that "servant" place, pretty quick. Maybe that's why the lectionary skips this section goes right to idyllic. In the end of the text, we can be the wolf or the lamb? The lion or the ox? I would suggest that our communities are not either/or, and that we ourselves are rarely either/or? So often we are privileged in some ways and oppressed in others, the ones who strive to serve and the ones who fail, the ones who find comfort in a world that we know is inequitable and, at the same time, the ones who advocate to end the inequities. Notice in the vision, the wolf and the lamb feed together.

My friends, like our biblical ancestors, we live in a world of empires, gross inequities and injustices. If we couldn't see that before, these pandemic glasses encourage us to peer through denial and reveal who has, and who does not, what we value, and how we impact one another and our aching earth. It is chaotic, it's

disruptive, it's discomfort, it's profound grief, requiring deep solidarity with the vulnerable and oppressed—**and**, as in every *kairos* moment, there is also possibility to hope more radically, dream more boldly and act more decisively than ever before—for a new heaven, and new earth. Not just for the few, but for **all** on the holy mountain. From our compromised places, may we act into that reality, as if our lives, and that of our families, our neighbours, and our common earthly home depended on it. Because, they do.

Questions:

How does your social location affect your reading of this text? How does it affect your view of “normal” and gestures to “return to normal”?

How do we speak in our communities of divine intentionality, or even the intentionality of “nature” in this context?

Is it possible to be both wolf and lamb? Or how do we engage with the polarities in this text, in our communities and in ourselves?

**Remember we often read Isaiah 64:1-9—“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down”—in 1st Advent, paired with Mark 13:24-37: “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.”*

Jennifer Henry

Pronouns: She/Her

Executive Director/ Directrice générale

KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives

KAIROS: Initiatives œcuméniques Canadiennes pour la justice

200-310 Dupont Avenue Toronto, ON Canada

jhenry@kairoscanada.org

@jhenry67 www.facebook.com/jennifer.henryatkairos

www.kairoscanada.org