

**CALL TO ACTION: GIVE; GENEROSITY SUNDAY; ISAIAH 65:17-25; 11.13.16;
THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

When we tell the story of Westminster to new members I love to recount how this church was founded and constructed in the decade before the Civil War by just forty people led by American/Canadian entrepreneur Jesse Ketchum. In those days, this end of Delaware Ave. was undeveloped and far from downtown.

When they petitioned the presbytery to be incorporated as a congregation with plans to build an 800-seat sanctuary some thought the idea far-fetched. Indeed, civil war would soon disrupt the city and nation. Then the recession of the 70's made their new, Noah's-ark-of-a-church look like an act of folly.

The 1880s were not much better. It wasn't easy to find steady pastoral leadership until the mid-1890s when Samuel Van Vranken Holmes was called to this pulpit. It was a time then when Buffalo was just coming to national prominence and surging, not unlike today.

And this is when the vision of the founders started to come to fruition. But it only came to fruition because the congregation of the 1890s, like the founders, heard their call to ministry to extend well beyond the walls of this church. You don't build an 800-seat sanctuary for forty people.

Long before Westminster became a leading church in this city, Dr. Holmes, the session, and members reached out to the East Side where waves of young German immigrants had settled and were living in squalid conditions. Westminster built and staffed a settlement house and offered classes in English language, home economics, child rearing, and arts appreciation.

Some credit Dr. Holmes with implanting into the spiritual DNA of this church the outward looking, mission-focused, justice work that has been our hallmark. But really it is the founders who took this parcel of empty land, when the city was still young and with limited resources, under the leadership of a business entrepreneur, responded to biblical texts like we have today; you see, our impulse to think and reach beyond ourselves to those who have no church or who suffer from the twists and turns of life or those who suffer by human design was with us from our very inception.

It wasn't until the 1950s that this sanctuary would routinely be filled – as was every other sanctuary in America during the baby-boom, post war years. But to see that as the high water mark as I have heard many churches do is to fall victim to nostalgia.

The 50s, like every other decade, had its own challenges. And just because people were choosing to go to church Sunday morning in those far less mobile, pre-mall, single bread-winner days when the hegemony of organized sports was decades away and being seen in the pews by your boss was worth whatever you put in the plate – doesn't mean the church then was healthier or more spiritually robust than it was before or after the 1950s.

The mark of a healthy and vital church is its ability to see beyond its own limited reality to God's reality and destiny.

This is what happens when we are at our best. It is what's going on in today's text described by one scholar as "the most sweeping statement of God's resolve and capacity for the recovery of creation in the bible."ⁱ

Here it is again: "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. Be glad and rejoice...no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in Jerusalem, or the cry of distress; they shall build homes and inhabit them; plant vineyards and eat their fruit; they shall not labor in vain...or bear children for calamity...The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion eat straw like the ox...They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, says the Lord."

You'd think Isaiah preached those lines when life was rosy and there was a laptop computer on every desk; far from it. This testimony to the triumph of human community came in the third generation after the return from Babylon. Yes, they were back in Jerusalem. Yes they worshipped again in the temple. But the city was in shambles. The walls that once protected them had yet to be rebuilt, the rubble and ruin of their homes and commercial center the Babylonian war machine laid to waste had yet to be reconstructed and the temple of Solomon – the once proud symbol of a faithful and prosperous nation – stood in disrepair and was a crumbling image of its former self.

What then would cause Isaiah and a handful of followers to paint such a compelling picture of human harmony, abundance and all-encompassing justice?

The vision was certainly not new. It was as old as Abraham and Sarah and God's promise to make their descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven; and to bless them so they would be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

You see, Isaiah and his followers heard the promises of old, promises of joy and hope in a new context. They realized the songs of joy and restoration were not to be taken as literally as their parents and grand parents who thought their return from captivity meant a future of new bricks and mortar, bustling commerce, and personal well-being. Rather, what they began to realize is the new Jerusalem Yahweh had in mind transcended and dwarfed a rebuilt replica of the old city of merchants, traders and happy citizens. Rather, God's eye was on another Jerusalem, a new Jerusalem of the heart.

Through Isaiah, God's vision of the new Jerusalem entered the hearts of the people.

They understood their return from Babylon was not just to rebuild a city but to take on the mantle and mandate of Abraham and Sarah and build a community that would be a blessing to all the families of the earth; to extend the call for justice and promise of hope to all people.

This is the shift every generation makes or not – from seeing their purpose as satisfying their own needs and expectations or understanding they are part of a larger, longer trajectory of history that may or may not be fulfilled in their lifetime, yet trusting that in God's time, God's vision will prevail.

This testimony to the power of God's vision to reshape people and communities started, as it always does, with a handful of people and went viral. It defies the world's logic and the cold calculations of profit and loss.

Because we are made in God's image we recognize our deepest, truest selves in the biblical call for justice and the promise of God's abundance for all regardless of race, creed, age, physical ability, sexual orientation or gender.

And this is particularly important following the election, when fear trumps hope and some, blinded by nostalgia and angered by a dwindling white and Christian population, await a promised yesteryear that never was; while others still in shock are tempted to retreat into the passivity of cynicism or the obeisance of intimidation by a bully.

But the Prayer of St. Francis reminds us why we are here and what our purpose is. This is why the leaders of our giving campaign lifted up this prayer these weeks.

And given a post-election world where people gain power and get rich by selling hate and where demeaning women, people of color, war heroes, handicapped persons and ethnic and religious groups is acceptable in a leader and has inspired a tidal wave of taunts and slurs made in public across the land since last Wednesday, the choice of this prayer was providential.

What our leaders trusted, rather than holding up 'duty' or 'obligation' or even worse, 'guilt,' is that relying on the image of God within us to recognize the call of God to us we will generate not just the resources to support a thriving ministry but also the moral courage to join the emerging movement to reknit a divided city and nation.

Imagine this: I am about to create a new Buffalo; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. Be glad and rejoice; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard or the cry of distress on the East Side or anywhere else in my beloved city.

No more shall they have to work two and three jobs to scrape together enough minimum and part time wages with no benefits to support their families but everyone who works will make a living wage.

They shall build not just offices, hotels and retail space but affordable homes and they shall inhabit them; their neighborhoods shall be safe; they shall all have access to healthy food, clean water, quality health care and education; nor will they bear children for the calamity of gangs or war. The mayor and council member shall feed together; the senate, congress and president shall honor their calling as public servants; and no one shall hurt or destroy in all my new Buffalo, my new New York, or my new United States of America, says the Lord."

Is that not the work now before us? Can we settle for anything less than the most sweeping vision to reclaim and restore human values and a humane society?

This what those who heed the call of Jesus to love God and serve the neighbor do as we pivot to the East Side to explore opportunities for ministry; and also as we pursue justice and healing across the chasms exposed by the election.

Progressive, principled congregations like ours have work to do.

We are living at a grave moment in our history as a nation.

It has never been my intention in this annual sermon to talk only about giving money as important and critical as that is. Nor can we afford to be vague about what

it means to give time and talent. What I am talking about and what I am asking us to do is to summon the moral vision and courage to find a path forward.

It would be hard to call ourselves a church, particularly a Presbyterian church, and not take seriously the potential social and political instability and unrest that threatens the days and months if not the years ahead.

If the new president is perceived by some to be a kind of chain saw or wrecking ball, a destroyer of rot and stagnation in government let us not take for granted the fragile compact that holds the republic together.

Let the idea take hold that elections are rigged and popular government begins to seem like an empty exercise; discredit the press, and the First Amendment is merely a license for lies and slander.

The viability of our system (less like a football than a Fabreiege egg) depends on a certain care, a restraint that avoids unjustified attacks and unfounded accusations against the system itself and demands integrity from those who hold positions of authority.

Nobel Laureate Bob Dylan spoke a profound truth when he sang, “Yes, indeed you’re gonna have to serve somebody/It may be the devil or it may be the Lord/But you’re gonna have to serve somebody.”

St. Francis and the leaders of this church and campaign urge that our service, our vocation, our calling be for others and for a ‘more perfect union’ as President Lincoln said after a war that divided and shattered the nation.

Marilyn Robinson says we have to clean up our act nationally; stop tolerating lies and slander; embrace again honesty and equity and give responsibility every bit of respect it deserves. We cannot sustain our civilization on cynicism and resentment on the left or right.ⁱⁱ

In the sobering reality of the present moment it is hard to imagine a better time to rededicate who we are and what we have to make this the best world possible.

How privileged we are to be on that journey with Abraham and Sarah to a promised land; and with Isaiah as builders of the new Jerusalem of the heart. The journey, of course, is the destination itself; it is a journey to be our best, to give our best, and to work for God’s best – despite unleashed hatred, rampant greed and looming fear.

The question we each will face in a few minutes as we hold our intention cards is this: “*What is my best?*” That’s what Jesse Ketchum and those forty founding members and Sam Holmes and his congregation – and so many others who sat in these very pews asked themselves. Now it’s our turn. Amen.

ⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1997) 548.

ⁱⁱ Marilynne Robinson, “On the Election,” *New York Review of Books*, November 10, 2016, 57.