

“A New Thing”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
November 13, 2016

**Isaiah 65: 17-25**

It's been an eventful week. It's been an emotional week. It's been a week full of surprises and strong reactions. Most Election Days produce drama and emotions. But few Election Days have produced such drama and emotion like this past Tuesday.

Elections inherently produce winners and losers. By their very nature, elections pit one side against another, and are the ultimate pass-fail exam. Which is why there have been such strong emotional reactions this week, and will continue to be for many people. There will be those who are excited for the winners, and there will be those who are despondent for the losers. And this would have been the situation no matter who had won on Tuesday.

But once the immediate aftermath of especially this presidential election is over, we must begin to look more deeply at what the election reveals about our country. We are a people not just deeply divided, but deeply disconnected from one another in many ways. No matter what demographic group we fall into, this election has made clear that we see others with skepticism and distrust. We are choosing to retreat away from those who are different than us, and that is driving wedges between us. There are more things that keep us apart – and that is of our own choosing, not something that is being forced upon us. When we choose to label, when we choose to stereotype, when we choose to slander – no matter what side we are on – we are choosing to disconnect from our neighbor, our friends, even our family who have different points of view.

It was incredibly helpful and meaningful for me to be at a conference/reunion this past week with the Wabash Pastoral Leadership Program. This was a program I participated in six years ago, and our group has continued to meet on an annual basis ever since. These are women and men who are not only fellow colleagues in ministry, but are close friends who have shared any number of life experiences together. It was personally renewing to be together and laugh, cry, pray, and share memories of God's grace in our collective lives.

But it also was so helpful for me professionally, in that our speaker was Dr. Nancy Ammerman, who spoke to our group about the importance of the church in our American society. The local congregation is one of the few places in our daily lives where we seek belonging and trust with one another, even though we don't all think

alike or view things the same way. It is in the safe spaces of churches that we discuss, learn from, even disagree with one another – but seek to remain connected to each other through our shared baptism in the Body of Christ. We don't always live up to that model, to be sure. But it is in our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ that we love one another as Christ has loved us – and that is not something up for a vote on a ballot.

Last week, we read Psalm 98, a text that is more commonly heard in the Christmas season whenever we sing “Joy to the World.” This week, we read Isaiah 65, which is always the Old Testament lesson in the lectionary for Easter Sunday. No, Frank has not gotten the calendars confused these two weeks! These have been the suggested texts for these two Sundays, as well. And today, Isaiah is our reminder that God has been, is, and always will be active and present in our world, creating new things that bring joy and hope to all.

It's important to note that when this passage was written, the people of Israel had begun to return to their homeland after exile. But what they faced was hard, challenging, and overwhelming. As one commentator notes, the people “are divided and somewhat cynical about their prospects. There is hardship in the land all around them; their lives are difficult. Their resentment of other nations is strong because of their experience of exile. The people are pursuing new venues of comfort and help” (Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 292).

It is into this situation that Isaiah proclaims God's message of hope and life. “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 forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight” (65:17-18). The people are called to leave behind their bitterness and resentment of the exile, and to trust in their God in what is before them. That new Jerusalem will not include weeping or despair; it will not include children who live but a few days, or seniors who don't live out a lifetime; it will be where people live in houses that are not destroyed, where people will plant and harvest food which will not be destroyed. It will be a place where God will never abandon them, and where God will always answer their prayers: “Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear” (65:24).

For a people who had only known exile for generations, to hear this word of the prophet would have indeed been good news. “For they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord – and their descendants as well” (65:23). That would give them a sense that their God would not desert them, but would be present for generations to come in this new earth and new Jerusalem.

As Mary Eleanor Johns states, as Christians, this vision of a new world is seen through the light of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. *Jesus' radical inclusivity, his model of claiming power through nonviolent action, and his ministry of presence reveal an unexpected model of messianic attributes. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection provide a new set of lenses for the world to engage in the new creation, not as a goal to be looked for off in the distance, but one to be realized here and now.*

*We may not know how God means to transform the universe, but we can confess that we know it is in God's power to do this. What remains possible for the single believer, the single congregation, is to do the work involved in such transformation by following the patterns of mercy that Christ has laid out for us . . . The church's job is not to cloister itself proclaiming the resurrection just in the everlasting. The proclamation is for the resurrection of life in this world as well. How do we understand our call to respond and participate in the new creation that Isaiah prophesies? (ibid).*

That's a great question for us: "How do we understand our call to respond and participate in the new creation that Isaiah prophesies?" It can be easy to feel that the new heavens and new earth that Isaiah speaks of is way off in the future; that it is for the next generation to strive for; that it is beyond our ability or need to address. But this new thing that the prophet proclaims gives the people assurance that God is with them NOW, and will forever be with them as they live faithfully into this new creation that is before them. As children of the living God, as disciples of Jesus Christ, we are called to respond and participate in this new creation in hope, in justice, and in love for the world.

What do we do now, and what will we do, to participate in God's new creation? We have tried new ways to reach out to our community, in our community picnic, Easter and Fall Festivals, VBS, and other community-focused events. We have sought to get to know our neighbors in new ways through these events, and through new means of sending cards to new residents in our community, and trying new ways on social media to share about our church. We have sought to nurture our faith through education, compassion, and service, through studies, grief support groups, and mission trips and community service projects. We have not been afraid to try that new thing that God calls us to, and whether we succeed or fail, we trust that we are always seeking to follow God's Spirit in faith.

But what new thing will God call us to in the future? What new ways will we be expected to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8)? Will we shrink in fear from the challenges that will come, or will we step forward in faith knowing that with God all things are possible? Will we see the world – not as politicians or cynics or warring factions see it – but as Christ sees it? Will we see the broken,

the downtrodden, the helpless, the ostracized, the weak – and respond to God’s call and participate in the new creation through compassion, empowerment, justice, and mercy?

(Walking to the table) Today is Stewardship Sunday. It is a day when we take stock of God’s blessings in us, for us, and through us. It is a day when we consider our monetary resources, and how we are called to share those gifts as a way of participating in God’s new creation today, tomorrow, and always.

Later in the service, you will be invited to come forward and place in these baskets both your offerings for the day, as well as your pledge cards of financial support for 2017. This has become our practice as a congregation on Stewardship Sunday. It’s not meant to be a way to “show off” what we are doing. It’s meant to be our opportunity to physically respond to God’s love for us, and placing our commitments on this table. It’s not an expectation that all of us do this. It is an invitation to respond in this way. If you don’t feel comfortable doing this, then please don’t feel pressured to do something you’d rather not do!

But as we witness this act later in the service – of people coming forward to the Lord’s Table and offering themselves and their commitments to God – perhaps we will see this as our way of participating in God’s new creation. For in our sacrifice and generosity, we move beyond the world’s labels and categories, and claim our God-given identity as disciples of Jesus Christ.

“Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating,” says the Lord. Alleluia! Amen.