

The Promise and Peril of a New Age Aborning

Text: Isaiah 65:23, 25; Romans 11:32, 36

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

"They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity." Isaiah 65:23

*"They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mansion," says the Lord.
Isaiah 65:25*

"... that he may have mercy upon all." Romans 11:32

"For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be glory for ever." Romans 11:36

This is a wonderful and exciting day in which to be alive in our fast-moving world. Since this Lord's Day is also the anniversary of this nation and our Declaration of Independence, I want to reflect just a little bit about the world in which we live and the movements of history of which we are a part, the tides of history that move back and forth. Sometimes in the midst of our own human experience we get so overwhelmed with the immediate and the present circumstance we fail to get that broader picture.

At the beginning of this century, after World War I, the great English poet Yeats wrote, "Things fall apart, the center cannot hold, the best have no conviction, and the worst are full of passionate intensity." Although that was written decades ago, it could be written as well today from some perspectives. The poets often see more deeply and see farther than most of us. But it is an interesting and fascinating time in which to be alive for, in the broader picture, we can see that we stand at the end of a long historical development.

This nation was born at the dawn of the modern period. The periodization of history is somewhat arbitrary, I suppose, but most scholars would agree that the 18th century was the dawn—it had some beginnings before that during the Age of the Enlightenment—and in this 18th century, *The Age of Reason*. That whole period of the ascendancy of the human was the context in which this nation was born. The human spirit began to come to flower in the fifteenth century, and in the Italian Renaissance there was a great flowering of art, of sculpture, and of

architecture. It was like after that long period of medievalism when the Church was so dominant and so oppressive, when there was a linkage between throne and altar. And finally, in the fifteenth century there was this breaking out, this blossoming of the human spirit. I think perhaps the sixteenth century of which we are the children—children of the Reformation and the counter-reformation—the sixteenth century was perhaps a detour. Maybe for a time the authoritarian structures of society once again asserted themselves. But inevitably the human person was going to break out.

Our nation was born in that context of history when all forms of authoritarianism were overthrown. There was the assertion of the human spirit. There was the conviction that there was dignity in every human person and that freedom and liberty were the God-given and God-intended virtues with which the human being and society was to live.

So our nation was born at a point of newness. That's really the first thing that I want to say to you this morning: that in the midst of history there is development. There is newness. Sometimes we get so depressed by the present. It seems as though things don't go anywhere and we get all enmeshed, and in a situation of no movement, of gridlock. We throw up our hands and we wonder if there's any hope, and if anyone can make any difference, if anyone can change things, if anybody can get things moving again. What I want to say to you is "Yes. Yes. Yes, in the long run there is movement. There is development." This nation was born at a point of newness. There was a new understanding of human government. There was a new understanding of the human person. There was an appreciation for the necessity of liberty and freedom in which the human individual could develop potential, God-given purpose.

There was recognition that the finest form of human government was the government that governed least, that was a "government of the people, by the people, and for the people" in that definition that Lincoln gave to this form of government 100 years later in the crisis of the Civil War. Lincoln really redefined the revolution when he said that this nation was "dedicated to the proposition that all people are created equal," and that the test of the Civil War was a test of whether or not this experiment indeed could come to fruition and realization of that high ideal of which it was initiated in the first place.

There is newness. We were born in the conception of things and in the understanding of reality and the understanding of history, and understanding of the human person that recognized the necessity of freedom, liberty, and democracy for the full flowering of the human person. For two hundred years plus we have been blessed. We have lived in this grand tradition and we have flourished and prospered as no other people. We come into this 20th century. It has been a tumultuous century. Yeats did not overstate the case early on in the century when he said, "Things fall apart, the center cannot hold." There was WWI, WWII, and the Cold War when we were locked in ideological conflict over

all those decades, using all of our resources for armament, escalating the arms race, bringing ourselves to the brink of disaster.

Then 1989, that amazing year. The columnist, George Will, says that there has not been such a year since the 16th century; in fact, he says there has never been such a fascinating, interesting, potentially devastating consequential year in all of history as the year 1989, when more people and more societies were thrust into the vortex of change than at any time in previous history, even more than in the tumultuous 16th century. The images of our present world tumble through our minds. The Leipzig prayer meetings, the candle light in the streets, hundreds, thousands of people praying. The Berlin Wall falling. People dancing, singing, hugging each other, celebrating. The removal of that oppressive Iron Curtain, allowing them to breathe, to be, to be free.

And, with the disintegrating of that Iron Curtain and that panoply of oppression, in the midst of our euphoria, we find the sparking of ancient feuds and ethnic cleansing. Our television screens are filled with old women in babushkas weeping over the bodies of wounded or dead soldiers: sons or grandsons. People destroying each other. Our world with all of its promise, yet so filled with peril. The fundamentalisms of the world, Judaism, Islam, Christian, the reactionary fearful tides that would turn the clock back, that would tear the world apart. Images of terrorism. The World Trade Center smoldering in the aftermath of the bomb. *Time Magazine* a week ago addressed the whole question of terrorism. Arrests in our major cities. Fear. A world that has such technology that small bands of committed people can hold the world hostage. Our today, so full of promise, so full of peril. Somalia children starving. South Africa, less than a year away from a popular vote. Latin America. Our cities. In 1989 the walls fell. We sang, we danced. And in the face of that promise we experience all of the peril.

But there is newness. We were born in newness, during a major shift in the understanding of the human person and the nature of human government. In 1989 a State House Planner named Fukuyama wrote an essay entitled, "The End of History," in which he said that western liberal democracy has been proven to be the only reasonable, rational government, and it will prevail. It has prevailed. Well, his essay stimulated counter essays, and there were those who said he was premature and he was far too optimistic. But it was his point that what we realized in 1989 was already signaled in 1806 when Napoleon's troops moved into the German city of Vienna and overcame the czars, the Prussian leader's forces bringing to fruition the French Revolution slogan of liberty and equality and fraternity. The French Revolution, the American Revolution, all of that simmering and in ferment for a couple of centuries, finally eventuates to where one can look at it and say, "The end of history: This is the way it will be."

Well, whether you agree with that or not, we are in a period full of ferment, full of promise, and full of peril which is always the case in the human situation. Let me suggest that not only is there newness in human history, but I believe that we are

on the threshold of a new age that holds tremendous promise for those who are not fainthearted.

That newness must now not only be our national heritage, but it must be shared with a global community. It is not simply because I would have you be Christian or altruistic, if I appeal to you simply out of your own self-interest, out of our national self-interest. *Then I would say that it is time now on this anniversary of our Declaration of Independence that we make a Declaration of Interdependence with the whole global community.* Do you realize that the peoples of this entire globe are more closely knit today than the peoples of the thirteen colonies on the eastern seaboard in 1776? This is a smaller world. This is a global village and it is incumbent upon us to commit ourselves to the whole world and the whole human family. We cannot live in narrowly nationalistic purposes, looking out only for America, Number One. If we were no more than selfish, it is incumbent upon us today to have a world vision.

But of course for us, the people of God, there is no choice, for we are a people of hope who are fired by a vision, who are shaped by a dream. It is a marvelous picture of the poet-prophet in Isaiah 65 of a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth, aligned with the purposes of the one eternal God, the creator of all. This God says, "Behold I create a new heaven and a new earth. I create Jerusalem anew, a joy. I will restore my people and I will bring my people into a period of peace and justice, such as they have never known. A kind of society where there will not be oppression, where there will not be exploitation, where a person can build a house and live in it, plant a garden and eat the fruit thereof, a society where children will not be raised to calamity, where people would live a long life, where they would call and the Lord would hear, where the wolf and the lamb would lie down together and the lion would eat straw like an ox. Where they would not hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain. That's the biblical vision.

There are those who say, "You have to be realistic. You have to be pragmatic. This is the real world. That's a dreamer. That's a poet." I want to say, that dream, that vision is the only real possibility for a world to be renewed, characterized by justice and peace, and the integrity of creation. It is not in the assertion of power. It is not in the measurements of dominance. It is not in being Number One. It is in seeking justice, being committed to peace, and taking care of the environment that holds the only possibility for the human family. I believe that we may be on the threshold of a new age of which the present chaos is to be the prelude, the disorientation before the new configuration. You can look at it all and wish you could turn the clock back, you can look at it all and long for some golden age behind you, but I'll tell you, you can't go home.

There is movement in history. There are hinge-points. This nation was born in newness and this nation stands today urgently in need of joining arms and hands with the peoples of the world in order to find Shalom, which is the purpose and the intention of God. Paul struggled with it. He couldn't figure out why his own

people were not seeing in Jesus the Way. He tried to put it together and figure it out - what in the world was going on. I don't think he was very successful, but he knew that God had an intention for the world that included not only his people, but also the nations. He knew that finally it was the covenant of grace with Abraham that this specially called people would be the blessing of God to all nations. Paul knew that just as all were disobedient, so God intended mercy for all. Therefore, the Christian who lives in the biblical vision is a dreamer. The biblical Christian is one who will leave no stone unturned to bring people together.

Hans Küng said, "There will be no peace among the nations until there is peace among the religions. And there will be no peace among the religions until we can find peace among the churches." So we sit and diddle and twiddle our thumbs while the world stands more in danger by religious power than any other power in the world. And we recognize that we cannot speak about the political and the economic, and then over here the spiritual. It is all one world. It is one God concerned about the totality of things, about a world in which there is not political oppression, a world in which there is not economic exploitation, and a world in which there is not adversarial relationships among those who are finally the children of one God.

The choice is always before us. We can dig in our heels, set our jaw, clench our teeth and try to resurrect yesterday. Or we can be people of the dream. People of the vision casting themselves in with a spirit that would move toward newness, for it is possible also here in the pulse of this new day as the poet Maya Angelou said, "You may have the grace to look up and out and into your sister's eyes and into your brother's face, to your country and say simply, very simply, with hope, 'Good morning. *Good morning.*'"