New Heaven, New Earth in Trump’s America

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Isaiah 65:17-25, Luke 21:5-19

I imagine you are all very tired of hearing about the election and its aftermath.

Some of you have expressed to me fear for your own safety, the safety of your children, and the safety of people you love.

Isaiah pictures a good land and a good time. Babies don’t die, and we all have places to live. Where we don’t have to fear that someone is going to take our home away from us. Where we will have the safety we hope for. Where our work will be good work, worth doing, and our children are safe. Where even omnivorous animals will be vegans (and like it!) Even our memories will be sweet ones, and every tear will be wiped away. This is the peaceable kingdom, the land of Shalom.

Needless to say, this is not our world.

Some people came up to Jesus and talked about great things were pretty much as they were: “Look at this temple, Jesus. Isn’t it just great that we are able to worship in peace here in Jerusalem? Isn’t it beautiful? Isn’t it great?”

Jesus sets them straight: Things are going to get bad; every stone in the temple will be torn down.

In fact, what Jesus describes is strangely reminiscent of how many people are feeling right now.

* Many will come in Jesus’s name, but bear false testimony about him and his presence.
* There will be conflict and violence on every side.
* We’ll see all kinds of natural and even supernatural disasters.
* People will be arrested for doing the *right* thing instead of doing the wrong things.

This sounds a lot more like our world.

It also reminds me of another time, in the sixteenth century in Europe. The church and state had effectively melded together. The church used violent means to force obedience, and attempted to sell salvation to fill its bank accounts.

It oversimplifies things to say so, and it oversimplifies to say this: small bands of Christians started wondering what the *true* testimony of Jesus was, and started reading the Scripture for themselves. They found a Christ of peace, not violence; they found a volunteer church, not a church/state union in which participation was automatic and forced. The found a gospel of grace, not works, and a certainty that God’s Spirit would guide them. They made mistakes (some of them really bad ones) but in the face of a church captured by the world, they started a movement that shook up the world and (among other things) led to our expression of the Christian faith.

As I said, that’s overly simple, but some of us look around, and have seen the Christian movement that has the largest number of adherents in the United States, white evangelicalism, throw its support behind a man who calls for violence against neighbors, who has exulted in vulgar and violent treatment of women, who apparently wants to create religious tests to determine the good people from the bad people.

There was a time when Jesus pointed to his religious establishment, and said: this is wrong, and needs to be (and will be) dismantled.

There was a time when the early Anabaptists looked at the state churches, and said: this is wrong, and we need to separate ourselves from that.

We are in such a time now. We look around and we see that when people hear “Christian” they think that means evangelical; and when they hear “Christian” and understand that to mean: violent, angry, racist, anti-woman, anti-gay; you can add your own adjectives. And they wouldn’t be wholly wrong, even if much good remains in the white evangelical church (after all, much good remained in the state churches of Europe, as well; and not everything was bad about first century Temple Judaism, as Paul reminds us).

This is the world we are in.

Jesus makes extravagant promises for his followers: words of wisdom will be provided, and not a hair of our head will perish. And our endurance will end with our very salvation. (He envisions, I believe, something like the peaceable kingdom).

But he acknowledges though our hairs may not perish, some of us will undergo persecution and even death. He acknowledges that this will put some of us out of our family circles. Jesus doesn’t promise us that level of safety.

But to “gain our souls,” to be the people we are called to be, we need to come out of the world, out of the church captured by the world. We will need to be, in Hauerwaus’s expression, “resident aliens” in the midst of so-called Christian America.

I have been thinking about how to make this very practical for us at Kalamazoo Mennonite. Nadia Bolz-Weber tweeted this after the election: “AA wisdom: just try and do the next, right thing.” We need to rely on the Spirit to guide us into that next, best thing as a church.

I have one small idea. There is something we have that we haven’t used very much in our community, and that is our good name. The community doesn’t know that there is something called “Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship,” and what it stands for. I wonder how we might use our name and sponsorship to be faithful to Jesus, to welcome those who fear for their safety, for building out small pieces of the peaceable kingdom.

In fact, I would like to create a small group of people who feel called to meet and discuss what it would mean for Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship to do the “next, right thing.” If you are interested in being part of this good, please let me know in some way. I’ll be sending out an email!

Of course, I also encourage you to reach out to your children, to your neighbors, and to your neighbors’ neighbors to look for ways to provide safety and peace in the midst of the current troubling time. And certainly, let’s remember to pray for one another.

As we move into prayer, I encourage you to share anything you’d like to share or pray about.