



Wonderful Things

NOVEMBER 7, 2021 | ISAIAH 25:1-19

WONDERFUL THINGS

ISAIAH 25:1-9

When I read our Scripture passage from Isaiah a couple of weeks ago, three things came to mind: the Lord of the Rings, Anglo-Saxon poetry, and central heating. That probably requires a bit of explanation.

It was the image of people living in a landscape of fallen cities that got that train of thought started. As many of you know, ministry is a second career for me; before that, I was an archaeologist and I guess reading about ruined cities brought back memories!

So first of all, if you've read or watched JRR Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, you will know that the action of that story takes place in a world littered with the ruins and the stories of once-great civilisations that had fallen. Broken-down watch-towers, massive statues, cities that are under-populated and crumbling at the edges. There is a constant sense of loss and hopelessness, and trying to act with hope in spite of that, right up until the ending, of course, which is very satisfying.

Now, you may not know this, but Tolkien openly drew on northern and western European mythology and poetry when he imagined the world of his books into being, and one of those sources was very old Anglo-Saxon poetry from England, dating back to about a thousand years ago. And in those poems, we get a glimpse of a world that is very different from ours. A world, an England, where they, too, found themselves living among the ruins of another and seemingly greater society: the Romans. Normally when we talk about Romans in church, it's about Jesus and it's in Israel. But the Roman empire took in a vast swath of northern Europe, and wherever they went, they built: roads, temples, coliseums, villas. And they brought other skills and technology with them, too, like delicate glass, intricate mosaics of tiles, and yes, central heating; it's called a hypocaust and it used forced warm air to heat the stone floors in all those villas and houses. Pretty neat for two thousand years ago.

Any archaeologist – even a retired one like me – will tell you that the Romans always left a lot of their stuff behind when they withdrew from a territory, and England was no exception. And that is the world that the next round of settlers, the Anglo-Saxons, found themselves in.

Crumbling buildings of a type they couldn't build; fragile clear green glass and vibrant red pottery of a kind they couldn't make; colourful tile floors showing images that were utterly foreign and strange. The central heating was totally unrecognizable to them. As Anglo-Saxons and the remaining earlier inhabitants of the land came together and built a new society, they did so surrounded by the rubble of the old. That sense of a world spiralling downward, humanity in decay, that seemed to be written across this landscape of empty temples and crumbling villas...it shaped the world view of the new inhabitants as they made homes and made sense of their surroundings.

If you Google Anglo-Saxon poetry and read some of it, you'll find that sense of living among ruins, the belief that everything good and noble and worthy about humanity was all located in the past, and disappearing in the present; and that the fate of the world was tending toward an unfortunate ending.

That is a very different worldview than what we have today; for the last few hundred years, we've tended to think of society as progressing: better technology, better human rights, safer cities and longer lives, ready availability of consumer goods, better access to food and education and medical care.

Not perfect; not all the way there. But headed in the right direction.

That is, more or less, the story that western society has told about itself for at least a few hundred years.

And yet, when we as Christians think about the end of human history, something that comes up a lot in the Bible, we tend to be a bit Lord of the Rings – Anglo-Saxon about it: we think in terms of decay, too, that a crumbling apart of society, humanity and the rest of creation must happen as we reach the end. Our reading from Isaiah this morning definitely has a bit of decay and rubble in it, and it is almost certainly a God-inspired reflection about what happens at the end of everything.

Isaiah is a really long book and not one that is easy to just jump into, so let me give you a sense of what was going on when the prophet Isaiah wrote this part of the book. It is before the exile, so God's people are living and working and worshipping in their own land; they haven't been conquered, the temple in Jerusalem is fine, the people are more or less living their lives. It's business – life – as usual. The chapters leading up to this one are like critiques of other neighbouring nations, a commentary on how those foreign nations conduct themselves.

God is speaking through Isaiah about the larger political world around them, nations that do not follow or respect Israel's God, but that God says are within his power and sphere of interest. Pretty bold.

And then we get this chunk of writing, which we read a bit of today, that steps away from Israel's present and looks explicitly toward the future. And in that future, we see God's wonderful plans of old unfolded, and all the powerful cities and nations of the world are reduced to rubble and silence.

It's a powerful image. Isaiah's readers back then would no doubt have hoped that this future would come true quickly for their small nation surrounded by big empires. There is definitely some rubble and destruction, but God's people would have been pleased to read about it: cities reduced to a heap, never to be rebuilt, ruthless nations coming to fear their God – to revere and honour God in overwhelmed awe. And in the midst of the rubble, God is at work, acting as a refuge for the poor and distressed, sheltering them from the storm and heat, the actions of those oppressive, ruthless nations, as all else is reduced to rubble around them.

There are several points of entry for us to find our own experience in this text today, places and moments in our lives or in our world that might very easily be described as rubble and ruin. It's Remembrance Sunday, and war and conflict are as pervasive and destructive now as they have been throughout human history. There has not yet been a war to end all wars, and whatever the intent or purpose, armed conflict causes damage: to cities and homes, to those who fight, and to those caught up in it.

Our society has had its foundations shaken in recent years, too, by the pandemic, by the shifting political landscape in Europe and North America, by a lot of past mistakes coming back to haunt us in the form of anything from extreme climate events to civil unrest and protest.

Even in our own lives, it's possible – perhaps even inevitable – that we'll have to journey over some rubble, too, whether it's a lost loved one, illness or injury, changes in our bodies or our circumstances.

Isaiah's descriptions of trouble resonate with us: a blast like a winter storm, the unrelenting, baking heat of a desert sun, overwhelming noise.

And for those of us who have made that journey, who have been through things, and have been conscious that God was with us and around us and working in the midst of it all, the descriptions of God's loving care resonate, too: refuge, shelter, shade, stillness.

A lot of the time, that's enough; to experience God's care and presence when we're standing in the rubble, whether it's our own or the world's. But God asks for and offers more.

In one of his many books about Christian faith, C.S. Lewis wrote that the deepest longings of our hearts are hints and echoes of the same things that God desires to give us. And Isaiah tells us that God plans to give us even more than companionship, care and comfort. He uses the image of a great feast to give us a sense of what God plans to come after, at the end of human history. And it's a far cry from rubble and decay. It's a party!

Feasts are a near-universal human activity, although nowadays we'd call it a dinner party or something like that. Across time and cultures, feasting is as much about the food as it is about sending a message to those at the feast and those watching the feast happen: a message of abundance, security, wealth, power and relationship. God's feast is the making that point in a big way: the best food, the finest wine, a powerful mountain-top location, and the guest list? Well, the guest list is everyone, all peoples, as Isaiah puts it.

It's the coming together of all God's people, drawn by our common longing for peace, for oneness, for love, for abundant, fulfilled life, a longing which is answered by God welcoming us to this wonderful, shared, abundant feast.

Whether there's a real, literal feast in our future or not, the image works so well to describe God's long-planned outcome at the end of human history. And with it, too, comes the end of some other things: an end to death, an end of sorrow, and an end of suffering and pain, physical, emotional and spiritual.

The trouble, the challenge, is the waiting.

I don't normally draw your attention to the pictures that I use on the cover of these sermon files. But I'd like you take a closer look this time, and then I'll share one last bit of archaeology with you.

This picture was part of an exhibition in 2018, coming from a new field of research called digital archaeology. It's of what was a covered marketplace in Aleppo, Syria, where, as we will all remember, there has been some intense and devastating conflict in the past decade.

Like so much of Aleppo, this marketplace was nearly reduced to rubble; the arches you see at the top of the picture are what was there, before it was destroyed. The old-looking, graceful ceiling is memory and a dream, interposed over this picture of rubble and brokenness and damage as a digital restoration; in grief, in remembrance and in hope.

It expresses beautifully the challenge that lies before us, as God's faithful people. To grieve and remember, to see and acknowledge the rubble and the damage done, the things that are broken and painful in our lives and in our world, past and present. And at the same time, to see and celebrate the potential for renewal in God's coming kingdom, and to hold on to the capacity to wait and hope in the present as God's plan of wonderful things unfolds.

We know more than Isaiah's first readers, God's people back then, knew. Over time, God has gradually revealed more and more of his plan, culminating in Jesus. So...we can trust the process, trust God's big plan, because we have seen more of it, in Jesus' birth and death, in his life and the new, resurrection life he makes possible for us all. And also because God's people waited once, for a very long time, and God delivered on the promise of the Messiah. As Christians thousands of years after Isaiah's time, we know more about God's wonderful plans because of Jesus, so we know that God's future is only going to fully come into being in a permanent way when Jesus and God's new heaven and new earth, his kingdom, come, in the end. We are waiting again, but with greater certainty, with a clearer vision of what we're waiting for, and with the chance to participate in the realization of that vision even now.

This is one of those parts of Scripture that has both good news and a challenge for us today. The good news is God's loving, sheltering care in the present and the abundant feast he has made us to long for and intends to welcome us to at the end of history. The challenge is to live each day with the shape of that future in mind now, working toward it, living like God's kingdom is already here, because we know it's coming: to save and to heal, to renew and restore, to bring peace and new, abundant life for all. Thanks be to God. Amen.