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INFINITE POSSIBILITIES  
ISAIAH 65:17-25

*It was a beautiful spring day when a farmer stepped outside to look over his fields. He then looked upward into a beautiful blue sky and saw an unusual cloud formation. It appeared that the clouds formed three letters: GPC.*

*Being a spiritual person, he began to discern if this was a sign from God and came to the conclusion that it was God telling him to “Go Preach Christ.” He returned to school, completed his seminary work, and was then appointed to his first church. His first sermon was absolutely abysmal. The second was worse than the first and the third was worse than the first two. It became obvious that something needed to be done, yet what could one say to a person who had received such a vivid calling? Finally one of the elders of the congregation, who could take it no longer, confronted the young preacher and said, “Young man, have you ever considered that the cloud formation that you saw did not mean “Go Preach Christ” but instead meant “Go Plant Corn?” (Dr. Rodney E. Wilmoth).*

The young preacher was nothing if not hopeful! And that is also where we meet the Prophet Isaiah, whom we call Third Isaiah, in our scripture for the day. The words of our lesson were forged in the reality of very tough times. These biblical words were written about the year 475 BCE. Two generations had passed after the people had returned from the devastated city of Jerusalem. The inhabitants recalled the former days of glory in Jerusalem and the beauty of Solomon's temple. Somehow the rebuilt version just didn't measure up to the original. And so as Isaiah walks through the rubble of what was, he is keenly aware that much of Jerusalem still lies in ruins. Homes and markets are not habitable, and the people are still feeling the ill effects of dislocation and oppression. “Hunger, thirst, illness and early death, sorrow and grief, economic injustice and political turmoil were the realities of the day” (Kathryn Matthews Huey, Sermon Seeds, “Infinite Possibilities”).

Still in the face of these grim conditions, the first generation of returnees is excited about coming back to their homeland. And even as bad as everything is, Third Isaiah and the people around him are yearning for hope, are wanting for positive change to take place. That is why our lesson from Chapter 65 opens with these words: “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.”

So what third Isaiah sketches out for us is essentially two worlds, one ruled by dark pessimists and the other ruled by bright optimists. As the prophet looks around him and sees the destruction everywhere, there is still within his breast a desire to look beyond that depressing reality and find hope.

It is like the verses written by an unknown poet about two pioneers and their opposite viewpoints as they helped settle America:

*As the covered wagon rolled and pitched  
Along the prairie track,  
One sat looking forward  
And one sat looking back.  
One searched the wide horizon  
For a bright and better day;  
And, one saw the disappointing road  
'Till it too slipped away.*

*As the covered wagon rolled and pitched  
Along the prairie track  
One sat looking forward  
And one sat looking back.*

These two ways of looking at the world can also be found in this story about positive thinking:

*An owner of a grocery store came to a master one day. He was very worried about a large chain grocery store that had opened across from his shop that would drive him out of business. The store had been in the grocer's family for more than a hundred years. To lose the store to a bigger company would lead to his demise, because there wasn't anything else he knew how to do.*

*The master was wise and calmly told him, "If you are fearful of the owner of this new chain store, you will hate him. Hatred will be your undoing."*

*The distressed grocer asked, "What shall I do then?"*

*The master told him that each morning he would need to walk out to the front of his shop and bless it, wishing it prosperity. He was then told to turn toward the new chain store and bless it as well.*

*The grocer couldn't believe he was being told to bless his competitor and destroyer!*

*In response to this reaction the wise master said, "Any blessing you give him will rebound to your good. Any evil you wish him will destroy you."*

*The next year the grocer had reported to his master that his store had shut down as he had feared, but that great good had come from it. He was now the manager of the new chain store and had greater possibilities and opportunities than he had ever realized before (Michael Rogers, [Positive Thinking Positive Results--I Love This Story!](http://www.teamworkandleadership.com) [www.teamworkandleadership.com](http://www.teamworkandleadership.com)).*

We know that every story, every situation has two sides and yet so often we fail to remember how we can stay positive even in the midst of all that seems to be negative. My parents were both born in Cleveland, what has been referred to as "The mistake on the lake." This is how one pastor writes about the two sides of the city:

*I look out my office window at one of the poorest cities in America: Cleveland, Ohio, in the so-called rust belt. The signs and stresses of poverty are on every block where one is approached by a person in need. The news on most nights reports another shooting, usually of a young person, and most often a person of color. Our children are gunned down by random bullets on their way to the store, and a fourteen-year-old suspended from school returns with guns and shoots two teachers before taking his own life....young girls, kidnapped and held captive and then miraculously free again, make the national and even international news. Drugs and high interest payday loans are readily available, our schools are struggling, and there are empty storefronts on downtown streets.*

For this minister now retired from the UCC national staff who lived and worked in the heart of Cleveland, this was her reality. And yet, she says something else is happening:

*Still, there are signs of rebirth and renewal, signs of promise, as this city struggles to recover its former glory. We're still the home of wonderful arts and medical and educational institutions, and city planners are hard at work to bring to life a new vision for the city. In just the past few years, streets and bridges are being rebuilt, apartment complexes are filled, and there's even the promise of a grocery store—downtown! One block from our offices, the main street is torn up with construction, and our impatience with the mess is tempered by the slim hope that the time has come for our city to shine once again (Kathryn Matthews Huey).*

What our United Church of Christ staffer is talking about, of course, is a tale of two cities. It's the story of the best of times and the worst of times. So the latter picture, the view

of Cleveland coming alive, as a symbol of progress, is the same kind of vision that Third Isaiah is seeing for the city of Jerusalem. Imagine what the people in 475 BCE must have thought when the prophet writes these words of our lesson: "...for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight." This is daring, powerful stuff! It's like the Mayor of Cleveland saying, "We're not going to be known as the 'Mistake on the Lake' any longer! We're not going to be defined by that put down. From now on, Cleveland is going to be known as a joy and its people as a delight!"

That is why Third Isaiah says that Jerusalem is going to undergo an extreme makeover. Instead of a place of doom and gloom, Jerusalem is going to become a city of celebration: "...No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress." What the prophet is telling the people is that the time to start dreaming big has come. For Third Isaiah, the City of Jerusalem has become a place of "Infinite Possibilities."

I love that kind of thinking, that wonderfully hopeful slant on the world! I once heard a man speak of himself as "A candle holder of hope." I can relate to that. I always call myself a "Blue Sky" kind of guy. I'm clearly a descendant of the pioneer who sat facing front!

Another person who seems to have come from that kind of stock is the artist, storyteller and writer, Ashley Bryan. During July, several of us—Eda, Madonna and me—took the mail boat to Little Cranberry Island on the Maine coast. And there we visited with the legendary Ashley in his home, just prior to his 96th birthday. During his lifetime, Ashley Bryan has been much celebrated: The first black author and illustrator of a book for children, the writer who has published over 45 volumes for his young friends, The Fulbright Scholar, The Dartmouth Professor, the Global Ambassador who has spent much time in Kenya building libraries. On and on it goes....

While we were there, Ashley showed us the galleys for his latest book, Infinite Hope, which was published this fall. This work is a first for Ashley Bryan: an autobiography designed for adult readers. It tells the story about a hidden portion of Ashley's life that almost no one knew: his life as a soldier during World War II.

Drafted in 1943 at the age of 19 while he was an art student at Cooper Union in New York, Ashley Bryan entered into basic training. Infinite Hope contains sketchbook and journal entries and letters to his fellow art student, Eva, wherever he went, Ashley packed his charcoal pencils and paper into his gas mask. He kept drawing wherever he was—even as his assignments took him to Boston, to Scotland, and to Omaha Beach on D-Day.

Ashley recounts painful experiences of segregation in the Army, the back-breaking labor of soldier stevedores, the death defying missions to clear land mines, the heartbreaking reality of walking through bombed European cities. For all of the challenges and death and destruction, Ashley Bryan thinks of this phase of his life ultimately as a journey toward peace. As he writes to his friend:

*There it is now, Eva. The nations of the world together. Heads together. Working out some means of keeping a peace in the world for the centuries to come. This is good, Eva. It is one of the most necessary steps taken in the interests of world survival (Ashley Bryan, Infinite Hope. New York: Athenaeum Books for Young Readers, 2019).*

Casting a look back to Third Isaiah—and before the time of Jesus-- I have to believe his counsel would be along the same lines. For in a real sense, The Prophet envisions a city of joy where all peoples would come together in peace. Clearly Third Isaiah has God in his front pocket and the Chamber of Commerce in his back pocket as he lays out his vision for the planners of the New Jerusalem:

*They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.... They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—and their descendants as well.*

The late, great Erma Bombeck wrote a best seller some years ago called I Want To Grow Hair, I Want To Grow Up, I Want To Go To Boise. The title comes from Ms. Bombeck's visit to Camp Sunrise, a camp designed for children and youth battling cancer, in the mountains outside of Payson, Arizona. When she was there, Erma Bombeck heard about a conversation a camper had with one of his leaders. The child said this: "My three wishes are to (1) grow hair, (2) grow up and (3) go to Boise." Before she visited Camp Sunrise, Ms. Bombeck didn't believe that she would find much humor in that place as the campers and staff coped with catastrophic illness. But Erma Bombeck found just the opposite was true. As one teenager said to her: "Would you be happier if we cried all the time?" Ms. Bombeck came away from Camp Sunrise feeling like third Isaiah's take on Jerusalem: "But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people a delight."

What the prophet is prophesying is a new identity for the city and for its people. And that reminds me of a story which has its setting in our own state:

*Cecil B. Demille, The Hollywood figure who so entertained the country for a generation with biblical epics, tells of an occasion when he was on vacation in Maine. He was paddling one day on a beautiful, crystal-clear lake, drifting along the edge of the lake where it was shallow and looking over the side of his boat to the bottom of the lake, when he saw a whole colony of water beetles. Among the ugliest creatures on the face of the earth, these beetles live most of their life in the shallow water at the bottom and just surface occasionally for some oxygen. He watched their little ugly lives through the clear, sparkling water for a time, and one of the water beetles surfaced and latched on to the side of Demille's boat and attached its feet into the wood and died. Demille drifted and paddled through the afternoon, and late in the day, he glanced over at the carcass of the water beetle still attached, hard and dry, to the side of the boat. As he watched, the hard shell of the beetle cracked open and a damp, little head emerged. Unfolding itself from the dry carcass of the water beetle, a dragonfly spread its gossamer wings and began to sail across the lake. The wonderful metamorphosis that nature provides for some members of the insect family changed what was once ugly and mundane and made it beautiful. Demille said to a friend later, "Do you think God would do that for a water beetle and not for me?" (Dr. Carl I. Schenck).*

Out of death came life. What Erma Bombeck found most memorable about her trip to Camp Sunrise was a host of children and youth who led vibrant lives and who faced and overcame their fear of death. Ms. Bombeck puts it this way:

*Kids with cancer seem to have a gift for cutting through the "What If," "What Should Have Been," "What Might Have Been" and getting directly to "What Is Now." Bert was five years old and fighting neuroblastoma. He loved to draw. One day when he was asked by a visitor, "Are you going to be an artist when you grow up?" Bert replied matter-of-factly, "I am an artist!" (Shelby).*

That comment would make Ashley Bryan proud! So whether it is restoring an ancient ruined city to a place of joy, or experiencing a modern blighted city come into its own, or giving a young soldier a vision of peace, or watching a water beetle become a dragonfly, or letting sick kids help us all to get better, our God continues to transform hearts and minds with infinite possibilities.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow!