

# “A Love that Transforms”

Isaiah 65:17-25; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

The Rev. Joanna Samuelson  
Interim Associate Minister

November 13, 2022

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ  
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: [home@first-church.org](mailto:home@first-church.org)

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

I want to begin this morning by thanking all of those who so faithfully share their time and talents, week in and week out, to create such meaningful and beautiful worship experiences -- including those who remain behind the scenes and yet play such significant roles. Thank you to all!

## “A Love that Transforms”

Isaiah 65:17-25; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

+++++

O Holy One, come to us now in this time of prayerful meditation. Touch our hearts, inspire our spirits and stretch our minds through Your Word – and through the words that you place on each of our hearts. And, O Dear God, may the words that I have to offer here, today, please you, and honor you and glorify your holy name. Amen!

+++++

I must tell you, that this morning, I am preaching a bit *outside* my comfort zone!

You see, I tend to focus on the Gospel readings in my sermons – and that’s because the lectionary that we follow guides us through the stories of the life and ministry of Jesus in a very intentional and often chronological or thematic way. And I don’t know about you, but I just don’t like to skip over any of these formative stories of our faith and our Christian tradition!

However, when I recently read our appointed Old Testament reading from Isaiah for today, I could just hear the voice of one of my Old Testament professors, the Rev. Dr. Julie Faith Parker, exclaiming in claim, “Don’t ignore the Hebrew Scriptures in your preaching!”

Because, yes, *of course*, the Old Testament includes: the sacred stories of our ancestors of faith – and the wisdom of the prophets.

Plus, *these stories* are also the Holy Scriptures that Jesus knew inside and out through his Jewish tradition and faith.

And it was **these** stories – these sacred texts – that inspired him and shaped him – and that he quoted often as a teacher and a preacher *and* a healer and a prophet – and as a justice-seeker!

So, with all of that in mind, let us now turn to our lectionary reading for this morning from the prophet Isaiah.

Now, you may recall that Book of Isaiah is one of the longest books of the Bible it has 66 chapters in all – and it helps to tell the story of God’s people – the Jewish people.

You may also know that it was under the reign of King Saul (the first king of Israel) that the first temple had been built in Jerusalem – and it was a magnificent temple, indeed!

And then, it was King David who had conquered Jerusalem and made it the capital of the Jewish kingdom!

And over time, Jerusalem became the religious and political and commercial center of the region.

And so, for generations and generations, Jerusalem was the place where the people of God had lived together and worked together and worshipped together ... for about **four hundred years!**

But then, in the year 597 BCE, the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar II, besieged Jerusalem – and *destroyed* the holy Temple – and burned the city down – including the businesses and even the private homes of the people!

And then, if that's not terrifying enough, a large percentage of the Jewish population of Jerusalem was taken captive – and sent into exile in Babylonia where they were then held in captivity from anywhere between 50 and 70 years!

Whether we like it or not, all that brutal history is right here – or at least referenced – in our Bible, and it is all found, there, in the second section of Isaiah (chapters 39-55).

And so, **ALL that** history is the backstory of our reading today from Isaiah 65.

It is hard to even begin to fathom *the layers upon layers of loss* that the Jewish people had experienced during that time.

Can you imagine what it must have been like to be abruptly cut off from all that was familiar and routine and comforting in their lives?

And what about the feelings of panic and worry and anxiety and despair that must have come with losing track and losing touch with their loved ones during that time of upheaval and turmoil?

And then, how frightening and disorienting it must have been to be completely uprooted and displaced and sent into exile in a foreign land!

Can you think of a time in your life when there was an abrupt ending or a cutoff in a significant relationship?

Can you remember a situation that you have experienced in which you had no control – and your voice didn't seem to matter – and so, you felt unseen and unheard?

Can you relate to feeling absolutely overwhelmed – and even lost – when you have found yourself in a new role or a new place or a new situation and felt like an outsider who didn't belong at all?

Our Old Testament reading from Isaiah today is written in such a way that it speaks to us – and invites us – to lift up *all* that we are feeling – and all that we are grieving – and all that we are holding in our hearts at this time!

So, let us now take a **closer** look this text from Isaiah 65 ...

It is a passage from the section that is referred to as “Third Isaiah” – or the last ten chapters of the Book of Isaiah.

And it describes the period *after* Babylon had fallen to Cyrus the Great – who then allowed those who had been exiled (to Babylon) to *finally* return back home to Jerusalem after **50 or more years** of captivity in Babylon!

And so, what did they find when they returned?

Jerusalem was still in ruin!

And the magnificent Temple that had been destroyed had not yet been rebuilt.

And so, of course, the returning Jerusalemites were discouraged and pessimistic and overwhelmed with the monumental tasks that were before them!

And the leaders who **had** emerged in their absence turned out to be corrupt and greedy, and under them, the people of Jerusalem were being oppressed!

And so, upon their return, it became crystal clear to those who **had** been in exile that it was, indeed, a time to rebuild and restore **all** that had been lost.

And so, how did they find encouragement and motivation? Where did they find inspiration?

It was through their faith in God and in words of Scripture – including the prophecy of Isaiah – who offered these words of hope that we find in our text for today.

Hear again these words from Isaiah from chapter 65:

*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.*

*I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people;  
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress.*

Isaiah 65 provides all of us today with a Scriptural framework to name the depth of our feelings including:

- the yearning for healing
- the expressions of grief and relief
- and hope for a new beginning as God's people

through our own process of returning, reforming, rebuilding and recreating community anew!

The prophet Isaiah reminds us that it **is only through** the transformational love of God that we are indeed knit together – and held together – and healed together – as we find hope together through the love and faith that we share together through the gift of this blessed community!

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

