

Under Construction

Isaiah 65: 17-25 & Revelation 21: 1-5

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 8th October 2006

Seeing the yellow “Danger-Warning” tape blocking off a corner of the sanctuary for several weeks under the falling plaster ceiling seemed odd and strangely out of place. It was one Sunday morning in July, during the passing of the peace, going down the aisle that I first saw the tape. I knew about the plaster falling and the puzzling leak (which is now no longer a puzzle), but didn’t know about the tape. It seemed oddly arresting to have the tape there. It looked like a construction zone had been set up in the heart of the church. It’s an image that has stayed with me, especially as I was taking down the tape before the American Guild of Organists’ service two Sundays ago. I thought of a line from the contemporary writer Annie Dillard who says we ought to be passing out crash helmets,¹ hard hats, when we go into worship instead of bulletins; a warning, perhaps, to all who have become complacent in the worship of the Wild One of Israel, a God who never lets things stay as they are.

That yellow tape in the sanctuary, I thought, was fitting for us as a congregation on so many levels. It’s helpful to remember that Christians, led as we are by the Spirit of Christ, are always people under construction, being molded, crafted, built up into something new. We are moving from where we are to some new place, some new insight or experience, which waits for us not in the remote past but in the future. John wrote in his first epistle, “Beloved, we are God’s children now; [yet] what we will be has not yet been revealed (1 John 3:2).” The apostle Paul knew that “now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face (1 Corinthians 13: 12).” Indeed, the entire creation, Paul tells us in Romans, waits with eager longing for the glory that is about to be revealed (Romans 8: 18-22). The Christian lives in the tension, between the *Now* and the *Not-yet*, in this maybe uncomfortable place between the world as it is post-resurrection and the world that even now God is creatively suffering through and moving us toward, a not yet fully realized world which is the end or goal of time, the goal toward which all of history is moving. That’s why from the beginning of the Christian movement, rooted as we are in Israel’s experience with Yahweh, the Christian orientation toward time is *future-focused*. As the Jesuit theologian and scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) often said, “*Dieu en avant*.” “God is ahead of us,” as well as within us and above us. We are on the way, becoming who we really are, living

¹ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 40.

out the full implications of our baptismal identities, because God is calling us from and toward the future.

What's striking about being "under construction" is that we never say in such times we're "over construction." There is a passive quality to this experience; we are acted upon, "under" the influence of something or someone else who is doing the building, making the changes. Implicit to saying our lives are "under construction" is the claim that we're not really in charge. Theologically, this is appropriate to lift up because it helps us remember that our lives are not our own, they belong to God, and that God wants to do and is doing something with and through us. God is the Master Builder, the Project Manager, as it were, who gracefully calls us all into being to be part of the Master Plan. God has a goal, a vision in mind – and here's the Master Plan.

"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." Jerusalem as the city of God's shalom becomes a metaphor for every city, the goal of communities, of nations. I just love this chapter. Here we find God creating what Jonathan Sacks calls "ecologies of hope," environments where hope can flourish.² This is what God wants for all people: a place where infants live into old age, where old age is well beyond one hundred, which is another way of talking about healthy, peaceful communities, free from war, that allow people to live longer. People will build their own homes (and not be enslaved to build for others) and then actually live in them, plant vineyards and eat the fruit of their labors. "They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity." Verse 24 is amazing, God says even before we call, God will answer, anticipating our needs. It's as if in the midst of our petitions Yahweh cuts us off mid-sentence because God is already acting. Even in the midst of our petitions, God is already engaged in our welfare. The culmination of God's vision is found when enemies are brought together in that peaceable kingdom where the wolf and the lamb will feed together. It's a future very similar to the New Jerusalem John got to view in his apocalypse on Patmos, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, where God dwells with God's people, wiping every tear from their eyes, and Death will be no more." For the voice of the Risen One then cries, "See, I am making all things new." *See – I am making all things new.*

² Cf. the quotation from the worship bulletin: "There is such a thing as an ecology of hope. There are environments in which it flourishes and others in which it dies." Jonathan Sacks, *Faith in the Future* (1995), cited in Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, *Hope Against Hope: Christian Eschatology at the Turn of the Millennium* (Eerdmans, 1999).

God loves to do a new thing, to make things new, to form and reform us, to create and recreate. When we're mixed up with the Living God there's no telling what God will do with us and for us. What's true for us individually must be true collectively, which means the church of Christ reflects the one who delights in "making all things new." The yellow tape in the sanctuary reminds us that the church is always under construction. God is building us into a people – *a people* – a community set apart to serve and to love, the Spirit is conforming us to God's vision, God's hopes and dreams. A healthy church is never static, but dynamic, moving with and open to the Spirit. We're on the way.

Catonsville Presbyterian Church is on the way in new ways. I think of all the things we learned about ourselves as a congregation as a result of the "Growing in God's Grace" Capital Campaign, of the way this community came together to support the vision of the campaign. I think of the confidence we gained in ourselves, a "can-do" attitude that allows us to move into the future God is preparing for us. I think of the fun and relative ease with which we were able to move through the pledge portion of the campaign. I think of Commitment Sunday last May, the joy and energy here in worship, the sense of celebration around tables behind the Church House in a great feast celebrating the generosity and goodness of God. I think of the way this church opened itself to trust God in new ways, relying on the power of prayer. And think of all the *new* mission dollars, more than \$96,000 (!) to be used for mission, money that is already making a huge difference in people's lives. Can you imagine the gratitude and joy on the faces of people in Mississippi as a result of our work? Imagine looking at the faces of the mothers in the new pediatric ward of Lubondai hospital, Congo, mothers living with hope that "they shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity (Is. 65: 23a)." Think of the children when the Child Care Center gets a new playground or when more families are served by CEFM or Congregations Concerned for the Homeless in Howard County. Greater possibilities, more energy, clearer direction, greater excitement and joy, are all sure signs that God is working through us in *this* "ecology of hope." We're providing a future for people.

Isaiah gives us an image of God who invests in the future of his people – all for the sake of the people. Isn't this what the church is called to do? The question for us is how do we *fund* that future? I'm going to try to answer this question next week. For now, let me just say, it's easy and infinitely more joyful funding the future when we remember it's about the people. Fundraising consultants know that people don't get exciting about giving to budgets. I've never met anyone in the church whose life was transformed by giving to a budget. But tell how money will change people's lives, then the money flows. As finance guru, Suze Orman says on her show on MS-NBC, "People first, then money, then things."

Henry Hansmann, a professor at Yale Law School and a specialist on the economics of nonprofit organizations, says that too many large institutions, non-profits, as well as churches approach finances the way one might a business or personal finance, where the goal is to save for that proverbial “rainy day,” where the goal is preserving assets. He says if a visitor came to earth from Mars and looked at how large universities, nonprofit organizations, and many churches operated, they would think these institutions were primarily investment funds – with programs and services run on the side, as if to fund a budget.³ A church doesn’t exist to fund the budget, but the budget is simply a tool that helps us to serve God’s people. It’s a tool. We give not in order to meet a budget, but to serve God’s people. It’s easy to see why some churches are doing away with budgets altogether and asking people prayerfully to give to the programs and the services – the people who are served through the giving of God’s people – and not to a budget. The pledge commitment to the campaign was a marvelous demonstration of this congregation’s generosity, giving to the ministry of this church. All of our publications focused not on the bricks and mortar, although important, but on the people, the faces of people past, present, and future who will be here when we’re all long gone.

This same spirit is required as we prayerfully consider our pledge for 2007 and bring our pledge cards to worship in three weeks. We give not to budgets, not to bricks and mortar alone. God is calling us to invest in God’s people, to create ecologies of hope. It’s one of the ways God constructs new people, new possibilities, and new hope.

As we move beyond the pledge portion of the campaign, we are even now planning for upcoming physical changes to our building. Then we literally will be under construction. We’ve been meeting with our architect, Mike Murphy, and will soon unveil some of the exciting proposed changes we have in mind that will strengthen our ministry and prepare us for the future God has in store. Come January, the organ will be out of commission as phase two of its renovation begins. I like to think that what occurs externally in the renovation of the building is somehow a reflection or extension of what is occurring *internally* within us as a people, of what we feel with our hearts about the overall mission of God among us, so that the building communicates something about the type of people we are and are becoming, something about the God we serve, who is always doing a new thing in us.

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³ Michael Durall, *Beyond the Collection Plate: Overcoming Obstacles to Faithful Giving*. Foreword by Thomas G. Bandy (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 142-143.

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