***A 21ST CENTURY VOCATION***

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Texts: 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13 and Isaiah 65:17-25

“*I am about to create new heavens and a new earth, says the Lord.* That hope-filled promise spoken by the prophet Isaiah offered great encouragement and hope to the people of Israel returning from exile. His words paint a rosy picture of the new life God is creating – long life without any weeping or distress, life full of peace and prosperity in all of creation, satisfying work and an abundance of blessings!. It is an idyllic picture of life together. *Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating…*” says the Lord. We do rejoice in that promise, but more than 2500 years after those words were spoken, we are still waiting for the new heavens and new earth to appear, for clearly they are not here yet. Weeping and cries of distress are still heard in hospitals, refugee camps, and war zones around the world. Wolves still devour the lambs, figuratively and literally; desperate prayers still await an answer.

Sometimes the vision of what might be and the reality of how things are seem impossibly far apart. I remember meeting with Keith Holland at our house the day after the October fire that according to one little girl at Karen’s school made us hobos for awhile. The pungent smell of smoke was heavy in the air and gray streaks of smoke stained the walls; it was cold, damp, and dim for there was no power or heat in the house. The basement still had standing water from the spray of fire hoses and broken pipes the day before. Standing in the midst of that mess of a house that had been our home Keith told us that we might find it hard to believe, but when he was done the house would be better than it was before the fire. It would take 4-5 months for the repairs, restoration, and de-smoking of our furnishings, but when all was said and done, it would be better. That promise seemed a little too good to believe! Over the next several months we watched as the house was first taken apart and then put back together – and as he said, it was better than before!

For all of us, life in the present is not the way we want it to be, not the way it is supposed to be, not the way God created us to be, not the way God promises it will be one day, some day. We wait for that day with the lingering question: when? How long are we to wait for the re-creation to take place, and what are we supposed to do while we are waiting? With our house we could at least inventory our losses, make decisions about the rebuild, and watch as it all took shape. What part do we play in that re-creation of the new heavens and earth that God not only *will do* but *is doing* among us?

In seminary, this time is described as “the already and the not yet.” It is that time between the coming of Jesus which marks the coming of God’s reign among us with its hope-filled promises of resurrection, new heavens, and a new earth – and the fulfillment of that promise in which the world will look a lot like that rosy picture painted by Isaiah. In this in between time – this “already and not yet” time – we have a role, says Jesus. We have a calling in this great re-creation that God is doing. In his book *The Day the Revolution Began* N.T. Wright describes our role this way:

*The vocation in question is that of being a genuine human being, with genuinely human tasks to perform as part of the Creator’s purpose for his world. The main task of this vocation is ‘image-bearing,’ reflecting the Creator’s wise stewardship into the world and reflecting the praises of all creation back to its maker*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

That is our calling – to try to be the people God created us to be, to live into our creation in the image of God and so to reflect in our day-to-day living and work the love, justice, compassion, kindness, faithfulness, peace, good stewardship, and care which we experience in God through Jesus Christ. How the – heaven – are we supposed to do all that?

Perhaps a starting point is the concluding point in the passage we read this morning from Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians: *Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.* That is our vocation in this 21st century: we are called to do the right thing! In our work, in our home, in our relationships, in our politics, in our lives – just do the right thing! Even when it is not the easy thing, even when it is not the popular thing, even when it is not the profitable thing, even when it is not the thing you WANT to do – do the right thing! Do those things Jesus calls you to do as his disciples, those things that Jesus would do were he in your shoes! Do those things that reflect the image of God in you!

The church in Thessalonica was wrestling with how to do that in the context of their life together. When Paul left that young church, there were no experienced leaders. There were no gospels to guide them, just stories of what Jesus had done and said. There were no trained pastors or elders to interpret Christian living for their life in 1st century Thessalonica, no one to tell them what to do. Those who had assumed leadership responsibilities had little authority to say what the right thing to do as a follower of Jesus might be. It was new ground for all of them! Since most of them were not Jews, they relied upon Greek philosophy and snippets of teachings of Paul to make decisions about what it meant to be Christian. Paul’s letters served to remind them of the example he had set when he was among them – working while teaching, sharing what he had to share, being a responsible member and contributor in the community. To be in the church is to do your part, contribute your gifts, and participate in the life and ministry of the community. As Paul’s letters remind us, the church is an organic body that relies upon the gifts of all of us. It thrives when all are contributing and participating; it suffers when gifts are withheld, kept idle, or turned away.

In his first letter to the Thessalonians Paul expressed deep affection for the church and offered gentle guidance for their life together. He urged them to be good citizens and to love and strengthen one another as they awaited the imminent return of the Lord. Even then there were those in the church who would not work to their potential, for Paul writes:

*Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, brothers and sisters, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. (I Thess. 5:13-15)*

Apparently there were some in their midst who decided that since Christ’s return was imminent there was no real need to work. They could just sit back and wait for him to arrive in glory. It wasn’t that they couldn’t work; they simply refused to work. Since the writing of that first letter, the situation had deteriorated further. The problem was not just idleness, not just a lazy failure to work, but a rebellious refusal to work that was creating disorder in the life of the church and threatened the church itself.

Paul’s point is that in this time while we await Christ’s return in glory, this time between *the already and the not yet*, we should be working – not in order to pad our bank accounts, not in order to find an identity, not in order to earn God’s good pleasure – but in order to participate in the new heavens and new earth that God is creating, that re-creation of all things that Jesus proclaimed as the Kingdom of God. It looks like that wonderful picture Isaiah painted – a picture of peace, mutual support, and prosperity, good health and great joy for all. Our calling is not to sit around and wait for God to make that happen, but to be the instruments by which God acts to make that vision a reality. From the very beginning humans have had a working role in God’s creation: caring for creation and for all with whom we share it. In order to do that, we are called to do the right thing for the earth, to do the right thing for one another especially for the most vulnerable in our midst, but most importantly to do the right thing for God. It demands of us faith, faithfulness, courage, and humility in all of life as we try to discern and do the right thing – whatever the right thing may be.

My dad once shared with me a quote that seemed apt to the events of this past week: *Nothing is politically right when it is morally wrong.[[2]](#endnote-2)* In all our decisions – private, public, and political alike – we should seek to do the right thing in God’s eyes. A choice is morally wrong if it violates God’s commandments or contradicts what Jesus taught and showed us about loving God with all that we are and loving all our neighbors as ourselves. It is not always obvious or easy to know what the right thing is. Sometimes the best we can do is follow the advice of Teddy Roosevelt: *“Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.”[[3]](#endnote-3)* Even then the right choice may not be crystal clear, but we are called to do the best we can and no less, without excuses or self-serving rationalizations to seek to reflect the image of God in us in the choices we make, perhaps taking that trite mnemonic – WWJD (What Would Jesus Do) – and turning it into a question for serious reflection, for ***the right thing*** we are called to do is that thing Jesus would do. Is that what you do? For, that is our vocation, the thing we are called to do! One and all, you and I, day in and day out, just do the right thing! Amen

1. N.T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, HarperOne:2016, p.76 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Quoted by John C. Peterson in the Center Presbyterian Church *Midweek Reminder*, March 2, 1988 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Teddy Roosevelt quoted by Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Leadership in Turbulent Times*, Simon & Schuster: 2018, p.133 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)