

Sermon for the Fourth Week in Lent, Year B  
The Rev Ian Burch  
Mini Mass during COVID  
Preached in person, limited capacity  
March 14, 15, and 16

I don't actually remember the day that I earned my master's degree. Through lots of strange administrative snarls — plus a rent bill that I was late in paying — I ended up having my degree mailed to me months after I earned it. Add to this that I really did not like seminary very much and was resigned to not attending the graduation ceremony, and you would have found me in a strange and ambivalent place emotionally when my degree finally arrived. Should I celebrate this achievement? Or should I just file it away and get back to work? I wasn't sure then, and I'm still not sure now. Even though I was quite ambivalent about my degree, and really the whole seminary, I did have an intuition that I should mark the achievement in some way. So, I had my degree nicely matted and framed — probably costing more than I should have spent on it — as a way to remember the celebration of earning my degree even though I had other and powerful negative feelings about the experience too.

That's a little how I feel today. Officially, we are one year away from closing our doors to in person worship. And here we are, together again. Admittedly, we have lots of rules. We can't sing. And we can only meet in small groups until many, many more people are vaccinated. And so, I want to find a place to celebrate that we are back together. And I also want to acknowledge that this isn't how I would have chosen to be back together. How do we honor how lovely it is to be back worshipping in this space while at the same time giving space to the knowledge that we have a long way to go until we are fully back to normal?

Our ancestors knew a thing or two about this dilemma. In the Old Testament reading, Isaiah is preaching to a group of people who have recently returned to Jerusalem after their time of captivity in Babylon. Imagine a city where the Temple has been rebuilt, but there is still debris all over the streets from war. Imagine seeing that the neighbor on one side of the street is safe while the neighbor on the other side is still missing. This is the context in which Isaiah is preaching — a city of despair laid on top of a city of hope — kind of like thin tracing paper stacked two deep, with the images bleeding through.

The truth is that most of life isn't like one thing or another thing. Instead, it is usually a blend. This pandemic, though, has made the blended nature of this life so much clearer. For every moment of despair, there is one of joy. For every isolated elder in our community, there is a nurse that takes an extra shift to care for COVID patients. For every dying aunt, there is a teacher that has stayed faithful to her class during unimaginably difficult circumstances. Life isn't one thing or another. A pandemic isn't one thing or another. The blend is the thing.

So what did Isaiah choose to preach? Did he preach about the broken aqueducts and the torn up roads? No he didn't. I don't think he was ignoring them. I think he knew that everyone could see the destruction. Isaiah saw himself as a messenger of God's hope, even in the midst of rough times.

*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.*

This will be our way forward as well. While acknowledging all the difficult parts of this year, we are still going to preach hope. We are still going to preach grace. And we are still going to preach about the good things God has done to bring a little bit of heaven here on earth.

It is not naive to lean on hope in this world. It is a bold and resistant act. God through Isaiah has given us a template for fierce hope, and in this strange season of transition, I suggest that we use it. To God be the glory, even in these difficult days. Amen.