

Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.

Today's Gospel reading is the second-to-last week in a nearly six-month chronological walk through several chapters of Luke. Next Sunday we will celebrate Christ the King, and the end of this liturgical year. The Sunday after that the season of Advent begins, and with it the beginning of the new church year and the start of lectionary year A and a journey with the Gospel of Matthew.

It is fitting, then, at this time of endings and new beginnings, that our scriptures mirror this flow, and teach us something about how to live in such times in our own lives.

This week's passage from Isaiah is one of the most soaring and beautiful in all of scripture, words of encouragement for those standing in the midst of brokenness and seeking a way forward.

Isaiah's words were spoken to comfort those who had returned from exile in Babylon to rebuild Jerusalem. It was one thing to have heard about the devastation, as the story was passed down from those who had lived it, but it was another thing to stand in the midst of it and wonder where to even begin.

Yet when those who had returned were standing and facing the utter destruction of their homeland, and hope must have felt fleeting, they were bolstered by the knowledge of a God who can and will create joy out of desolation – the promise that they would not labor in vain, that they would be blessed, and that God would be with them.

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In our reading from Luke there are layers of endings and beginnings. The placement of today's passage is the beginning of Jesus' final sermon before the Last Supper – the beginning of the end of Jesus' earthly ministry.

On that last night together, as the powers that be were circling and closing in, Jesus knew it. No doubt his disciples did too, and they were looking to him for some kind of triumphant deliverance – a victory, a New Exodus from Roman occupation, or even for something like the inauguration of the “new heavens” and “new earth” described by Isaiah. They were expecting that Jesus, as the long-awaited Messiah and will act with power and glory.¹

Instead of victory in earthly terms, Jesus offered them salvation on God's terms. Messianic deliverance won't look like they thought it would – the stuff of this world will end. And when it does it will be devastating (just like it had been for their forebears in faith who had lived in exile). But just like then, there is hope to be found: take heart, you will not perish. Not a hair on your head will perish, by your endurance you will gain your souls.

Think of it this way: Luke began his Gospel with Mary singing that God's mission to “lift up the lowly,” “scatter the proud in their hearts,” and “bring down the powerful from their thrones” (Luke 1:51-52) – and now, in Jesus' last sermon, he presented the difficult truth that this world-turning will involve struggle and loss, trials and adversity. His passion was about to begin, and the path to new life would lead through “the place that is called The Skull” (Luke 23:33).²

But it won't end there. That same path continues on beyond the cross to the empty tomb. Despite the coming trials – or indeed precising in the midst of them – we should remain encouraged and trust that Mary's song is unfolding around us, a new creation is being born. Elsewhere in scripture these are called the birth pangs, the pain that heralds new life.

¹ Salt Project, Lectionary Commentary for Proper 28C.

² Salt Project, Lectionary Commentary for Proper 28C.

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These two stories would have been a powerful for the first hearers of this Gospel. The Gospel of Luke was likely written a short time (perhaps two or three decades) after the Romans put down a major Jewish rebellion, devastating and destroying the temple in the process.

In today's passage, by foretelling these traumatic events, Jesus effectively reframed them as a part of God's world-turning, world-transforming, work – concrete “signs” not that all was lost, but rather that “your redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:11,28).³

They are powerful for us too, because they teach us that the ultimate ending (Jesus' death), will lead to the ultimate beginning (the resurrection). No matter how hopeless things seem, God will make a way out of no way, remaking the world, turning it upside down in order to create it right-side up.

God knows that **we** need hope in order to stand in the midst of endings and beginnings, just as the Israelites did, just as those gathered around the table in the upper room with Jesus did, just as those who read and listened to the Gospel of Luke did.

Endings and beginnings are all around us – and woven into our lives. Whether we look outward or inward we can find devastation and destruction, war and betrayal, sorrow and loss. But there are also joy and delight, peace and wisdom, endurance and rejoicing.

And trust. Trust that no matter what, God is with us. In the midst of suffering, God cries with us. In the midst of celebration, God delights with us. In the midst of anxiety, God embraces us with peace. And in moments of doubt , God listens and loves us just the same.

³ Salt Project, Lectionary Commentary for Proper 28C.

Trust in all of this, and more, is the foundation of hope – and hope is the gift that God gives again and again, throughout scripture, to help us through the ups and downs of life.

Hope led those returning from exile to believe they could rebuild Jerusalem. Hope is what remained in Luke's vision of the end of times. Hope is what we have to draw on when everything seems too much.

So I wonder, what is giving you hope today? What do you need hope for in your life right now? Do you know someone who needs a word of hope – and will you share it with them?

My prayer is that as we come to the close of another church year, as we face endings of various sorts in our own lives, as we see signs of endings the world around us – that we will join our ancestors in faith and step forward in trust and hope. For when we do, we offer hope to a world that desperately needs it.

~ Amen ~