



Sermon, November 5, 2017  
Rev. Dr. Craig S. Pesti-Strobel  
Coburg and Junction City United Methodist Churches

Sermon Series: Tending the Path  
**“The Center Does Not Hold”**

**Scripture: Isaiah 65:17-25 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)**

<sup>17</sup> For I am about to create new heavens  
and a new earth;  
the former things shall not be remembered  
or come to mind.  
<sup>18</sup> 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.  
<sup>19</sup> 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.  
<sup>20</sup> No more shall there be in it  
an infant that lives but a few days,  
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;  
for one who dies at a hundred years will be  
considered a youth,  
and one who falls short of a hundred will be  
considered accursed.

<sup>21</sup> They shall build houses and inhabit them;  
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.  
<sup>22</sup> They shall not build and another inhabit;  
they shall not plant and another eat;  
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my  
people be,  
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their  
hands.  
<sup>23</sup> They shall not labor in vain,  
or bear children for calamity;  
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—  
and their descendants as well.  
<sup>24</sup> Before they call I will answer,  
while they are yet speaking I will hear.  
<sup>25</sup> The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,  
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;  
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!  
They shall not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain,  
says the Lord.

**New Jerusalem**

“I am about to create new heavens and a new earth... no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress... The wolf and the lamb shall feed together... They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.” These words of Isaiah not only spoke hope and promise to the Judahite captives in Babylon 2500 years ago, they provided a powerful image that captured the fervor of a dawning new age of human civilization 2000 years later, as the Christian church struggled with the forces of Reformation and the uneasy and awkward alliance between church and monarchy began to fall apart.

## "The Center Does Not Hold"

These words about a new heavens and a new earth coalesced around the image of a New Jerusalem, and become a golden thread running through the political and religious upheavals for the next 500 years following Martin Luther's distribution of the 95 Theses. The idea of a new Jerusalem provided a powerful image of a renewed political and religious structure for society, and found especially strong expression in the Calvinist Puritanism in England.

### **Puritans in England – England was to be the New Jerusalem**

England was to be the New Jerusalem to the Puritans, a City set on a hill, a light to the world. The Anglican faith that King Henry established under the leadership of Thomas Cranmer was not reformed enough to the Puritans, and they fought many bloody battles to establish what they called the Commonwealth, eventually led by Oliver Cromwell. They rose to power in Parliament, and voted to behead Charles I. But after the Commonwealth collapsed under Cromwell, the Puritans were not well-received in England, and sought other shores, first in the Netherlands, and then in North America, where they would establish the New England=New Jerusalem.

### **Modernism**

This time period was also the time period in which leading thinkers sought to understand the world around them through the use of reason and experimentation – the rise of the scientific Method. As the absolute authority of the Church to define the nature and reasons for the way the world was as it was, and as people were emboldened to think for themselves about religious matters and the Bible, they began to think for themselves regarding the natural world, and political world as well. This gave rise to what is commonly called Modernism, which is nicely described by Melissa Beckett in her blog this way: "Modern thought is commonly defined by belief in '**progress**', '**rationality**', and '**absolute knowledge**'. These beliefs involve the ideas that the search for knowledge should be guided by rational inquiry, and that progress of the world will be achieved through intellectual advancement. Put simply, modern

## “The Center Does Not Hold”

thought involves the idea that technological and scientific advancements, and the search for truth, will better the world.”

This time period also saw the expansion of European hegemony around the world, and the spread of empires and accompanying trade around the globe. Advancements in technology, armaments, navigational prowess, and shipbuilding led to conquests around the globe, especially in the Americas, and the subsequent successes of those technologically-assisted conquests gave rise to the presumption of the superiority of those European countries and economic interests. This was bolstered by religious assumptions of God’s favor being demonstrated by those victories, etc.

The idea of progress, socially and scientifically arises in the midst of this.

### **Idea of Progress and Capitalism**

The enthusiasm and naïve optimism of the idea of progress of this time is illustrated cogently in the speech given by the character I portrayed recently in the play I was in at Willamette University, *An Inspector Calls*. At the beginning of the play, which is set in 1912, Arthur Birling, a wealthy industrialist in Upper Midlands of England, while celebrating the engagement of his daughter to the son of another wealthy industrialist, gives the following speech to allay his son’s fears about the possibility of war:

“The world’s developing so fast that it’ll make war impossible. Look at the progress we’re making. In a year or two we’ll have aeroplanes that will be able to go anywhere. And look at the headway the automobile’s making – bigger and faster all the time. And then ships. Why, a friend of mine just went over this new liner last week – the Titanic. She sails next week. 46,800 tons – 46,800 tons – New York in five days – and every luxury. And unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable. That’s what you’ve got to keep your eye on – facts like that, progress like that – and not a few German officers talking nonsense and a few scaremongers here making a fuss about nothing. Now you three young people just listen to this, and remember what I’m telling you now. In 20 or 30 years’ time, say in

## "The Center Does Not Hold"

1940, you may be giving a party like this, your son or daughter might be getting engaged, and I tell you, by that time you'll be living in a world that will have forgotten these Capital versus Labor agitations and all these silly little war scares. There'll be peace and prosperity and rapid progress everywhere, except, of course, in Russia, which will always be behindhand, naturally."

### **2 World Wars**

As we know, in just two years later, war erupted in Europe and spilled out around the world. Birling was right in one respect, the world continued to make technological advances, but it used most of those advances in order to develop artillery, bombs, tanks, and aeroplanes to more effectively and devastatingly kill people and destroy cities and homes. What had happened to Isaiah's vision: "the wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox...they shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain?"

### **Yeats poem: "The Second Coming"**

The title of this morning's sermon comes from a poem that William Butler Yeats wrote in 1919 as he contemplated the horror and devastation of that war:

#### **The Second Coming (by William Butler Yeats)**

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.  
Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi  
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert

## "The Center Does Not Hold"

A shape with lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

### **Rise of the Postmodern and New Jerusalem as a Fool's Errand**

That war was to be the "War that Ends All Wars." Did it? Not when industrialists and corporations discovered the money to be made in military interests. The experience of two world wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century shattered the illusion of unrelenting social improvement and progress. Then, after the experience of the Korean War and the Vietnam war, people began to take heed of President Eisenhower's warning about the Military-Industrial Complex. People questioned whose interests were being served by the presentation of information and the claims for truth presented by all the various aspects of society. This questioning began in Europe and gradually spread to the U.S. in the late 70s. The institutions that in the 50s and 60s seemed to be so critical for the rebuilding of society after the devastations of two World Wars and a global depression began to lose their trustworthiness.

The rise of the internet exacerbated this decentering of trust. As more information became available, people began to realize that many stories and perspectives were being ignored, repressed, or even silenced. There was no longer one grand story in which everyone could find themselves. In essence, the search for a New Jerusalem was declared to be a fool's errand. The only thing anyone could depend upon, or be sure of, was what they were experiencing right at that moment, and so people began to seek out experiences, churches, or events that provided a thrill or religious experience right at that moment, and that was enough.

## "The Center Does Not Hold"

Then add to this the widespread clergy sexual abuse revelations, not only in the Catholic Church but in many other denominations as well, plus the co-opting of religious conservatism and evangelicalism by the political right wing. More and more younger people began to identify Christianity with intolerance, bigotry, and after the recent elections, with white supremacy. This is not the New Jerusalem envisioned by Isaiah.

What seems clear to me, is that the New Jerusalem will not be brought about by bullets, bombs and more bloodshed. The lions and wolves that run rampant in human hearts and rule the day in our seats of power will need to be tamed. A cultural revolution will have to take place that will need to be based upon the Way of Nonviolence that Jesus and other religious leaders have taught over the centuries. The violence of greed and exploitation of human beings and the earth's abundance for the monetary gain of a few people has to come to an end.

It is time for us as the followers of Jesus Christ to be seized by this vision. Next Saturday, as many of us gather to envision our future as faith communities, I offer this vision of Isaiah not as a fool's errand, but as a powerhouse of hope, and the true possibility of peace.