

The best is yet to come

Isaiah 65:17-25

November 18, 2007

In a few days, there comes a holiday, a holy day. A day meant to be set apart from the rest. A day meant to be lived differently from other days. A day to stop doing what you would normally be doing. A day to stop the routine. A day to stop business as usual. A day to stop the treadmill.

A day to stop ... A day to pause. A day to be still. A day to stop and to pause and to be still, even if only for a day, even if only for a moment.

But we have largely forgotten the pause. We have largely forgotten to stop. We have largely forgotten how to be still. Our holidays are filled with commotion and noise and activity, not with something entirely different from other days, but with more of the same. More shopping, more going, more stuff! More events crowding our calendars. More items added to our to-do lists. More people on our to-see lists.

Thanksgiving has managed to remain free of much of the commercialization that overwhelms other holidays, but it too is often missing the pause. We travel more on Thanksgiving. We spend more time in preparing the house and preparing the meal and making sure everything is just right.

And we watch more TV! You can watch the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade, or a new episode of Grey's Anatomy, or any number of popular movies, or, of course, America's most sacred Thanksgiving tradition -- football! You will have three NFL games and a college game to choose from, or since the NFL games are scheduled consecutively, you don't have to choose. You can watch them all! All football, all day!

I know I'm going to want to watch some football. And I know we will spend so much time getting the meal ready and then so quickly it will be done and then so quickly the day will be done ... and I will wonder what happened to the pause.

But this year, I will have some help with the pause! Jack will be there and I will want to just sit there and hold him, and holding him I will pause and think about the precious value of life, of his life, and his mother's and father's lives, and mine, and all my family, and all of us. And I will think about the One who gave him life, the One who gives us life.

We need the pause! We need to reflect, to remember, to be refreshed. We need to pull aside, to pull back, to take the long view, to put things in perspective, to put ourselves in perspective. We need the pause.

So let's do it! Let's pause, right here, right now! Let's be still and reflect together, as a church family, if just for a moment. Put aside the building and the programs, the activities and the issues, the tasks and the concerns. Pause and remember and reflect. Reflect on who and what we are at this moment in time. Reflect on who and what the Lord God is to us at this moment in time.

Let's pull back and take the long view and consider ourselves in the broad sweep of history: the broad sweep of our history, of our own histories, of our place in the ancient and ongoing history of the people of the God called Yahweh, of our place in the still unfolding drama of the creation itself.

When you pause and step back and look, what do you see? What do you have to say about God, what do you have to say to God, when you consider where we have come from and where we are going?

(responses from congregation)

And when you pause and step back and listen, what do you hear? What does God have to say to us?

I am making a new earth and new heavens. The events of the past will be completely forgotten. Be glad and rejoice forever in what I create! The new Jerusalem I make will be full of joy, and her people will be happy. I myself will be filled with joy because of Jerusalem and her people ...

God speaks to us about the future. God is always pointing toward the future! God intends that we -- just like the people of Jerusalem coming home from exile to a ravaged and barren and forlorn city -- God intends that we live toward the promise, that we live for the sake of the promise, the promise of a new heaven and a new earth.

The words in Isaiah are chosen carefully, offering a vision of the future that speaks directly to the plight of these returning exiles.

They have cried many tears ... The Lord promises: *There will be no weeping there!*

They have called out for help many times ... The Lord promises: *There will be no calling for help there!*

They have seen family members and neighbors lives cut short by violence and hunger and disease and oppression ... The Lord promises: *All people will live out their life span.*

They have watched their children suffer ... The Lord promises, *Children will not meet with disaster.*

They have been driven from the homes they have built ... The Lord promises: *People will build houses and get to live in them!*

The bounty of the fields they have planted has been harvested and enjoyed by their oppressors ... The Lord promises: *People will plant vineyards and enjoy the wine!*

They have been uprooted, humiliated, beaten down, and, in their estimation, utterly abandoned by God ... The Lord promises: *Even before people finish praying to me, I will answer.*

Their lives have been dominated by conflict. Their world has always been dominated by conflict ... The Lord promises: *In the new earth I am making, wolves and lambs will eat together.*

They are invited to live toward the promise. They are invited to live for the sake of the promise. And as they embrace that promised future, they find both meaning and purpose, both hope and joy ... now!

So when you pause and step back and listen, what do you hear? What does God have to say to us? Our situation, our issues, our needs, are not the same as the returning Jewish exiles. Our children are not at risk. We have not been uprooted from our homes and jobs. Our lives are not dominated by conflict and violence and suffering.

Are they? Maybe they are. Especially when we enlarge our sense of who "us" is, maybe they are.

We are at risk of a vision that is too narrow, a hunger that is too easily satisfied, a dream that is too small. We are at risk of complacency. It is good to say "Thank you" for the precious gifts God has given us, but God is not done giving! The best is yet to come! God's promise is a new heaven and a new earth. There is much that is good and beautiful and satisfying about this earth and this heaven, about things as they are, but all this is just the appetizer! The best is yet to come!

We give God thanks for the freedoms we enjoy, but the best is yet to come ... a day when freedom will be enjoyed by all God's children, guaranteed not by the blood of soldiers, but by a common allegiance to God's just and merciful rule.

We give God thanks for peace in our homeland, but the best is yet to come ... a day when God will bring peace to all homelands, when war will be no more, when creatures and creation will live in harmony with each other and with God.

We give God thanks for good friends, but the best is yet to come ... God will turn enemies into friends. God will reconcile people and nations. God's perfect love will drive out all fear.

We give God thanks for the health and well-being of our children and grandchildren, but the best is yet to come ... a day when no child will be left behind, when no child will be left out, when no child will starve or suffer abuse or live unloved.

We give God thanks for the fruits of our labors, for comfortable homes and good food and for so many of life's little pleasures, but the best is yet to come ... a day when the poor will be made rich and the downtrodden will be lifted up, and all people will share gladly with each other the limitless bounties of God's grace.

We give God thanks for the gift of life itself, but the best is yet to come ... a day when God will give the gift of life that is eternal.

We give God thanks for hope and faith and answers to prayer, but the best is yet to come ... a day when you and I and all humanity will see the living God face-to-face!

We need the pause. We need to reflect, to remember, to be refreshed. We need to pull aside, to pull back, to take the long view, to put things in perspective, to put ourselves in perspective. We need to remember the promise and live for the sake of the promise, to be thankful, yes, to be thankful day by day by day for the blessings of that day, but to be restless too and still unsatisfied until the promise is fulfilled.

We need the pause ...