



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## Trusting in God's Promised Future

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

November 14, 2010

Ordinary 33 (Year C)

**Isaiah 65:17-25**

### Isaiah 65:17-25

*For 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.  
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.  
They shall build houses and inhabit them;  
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.  
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.  
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.  
Before they call I will answer,  
while they are yet speaking I will hear.  
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*

All of us have our ways of handling the pressures and trials of life. We've each discovered ways of coping to carry on in the midst of difficult days.

Some hit the golf course or head off on the hiking trails.

Still others of us will seek out someone to whom we pour out what we're feeling.

In some way or another, most of the time at least, we figure out a way to continue life in the midst of challenging circumstances.

As for me, I listen to one of my favorite songs, Louie Armstrong's *What a Wonderful World*. Whenever things start to get a bit crazy for me, I will put the disc in the cd player and tune it to track 1, *What a Wonderful World*, and set it to play continuously. It has a way of soothing the soul for me, of giving me a sense of perspective when the world seems as if it's caving in on me.

By the time it's played a few times, I discover that I'm no longer listening to the words or the melody, but the echoes reverberate in my mind. Then, sustained by the majestic swirl of text, tune, and voice, it's as if I'm plucked from the travails I'm facing and taken to a new world where "I see skies of blue and clouds of white" and my spirit is renewed once more.

And it is a wonderful world in which we live. Ours is a world where children still laugh and dance and sing. Ours is a world where couples still stand before God and a congregation pledging that they will love each other, as many have done in this sanctuary over the years. Ours is a world where people can work together for peace even though they don't agree on all the issues involved. Ours is a world filled with beautiful and good things which remind us of God's loving care.

During this upcoming Thanksgiving week, each of us in our own ways will be looking at the world around us and giving thanks. We will rejoice at the blessings we see—especially those blessings that Thanksgiving enables us to bring to mind—and, if we look closely, we'll discover anew the beauty and majesty of God's good creation.

The whole notion of thanksgiving—of gratitude—begins with the understanding that everything that exists comes to us as gifts from our loving God. I don't know about you, but I've found that whenever I reflect on what I have to be thankful for, I end up singing with Louis, "what a wonderful world."

Of course, you know the truth as well as I do: though it may be a wonderful world, it's also a broken world. Look around. It doesn't take long to see the signs. We live in a broken world.

We sit at the kitchen table and stare blankly at the person across from us, wondering how we ever reached the point we're in.

We walk toward our office without an ounce of joy because we don't see the value in what we're doing and we don't trust our co-workers.

We see the cars streaming into the parking lot on Food Pantry morning and we know that so many would be hurting even more without our congregation's response.

So much brokenness and pain, and whenever we sense it around us or within us, the temptation to despair is there, isn't it? It doesn't take us long to realize the brokenness around us. It doesn't take long to discover that this wonderful world is a broken world in need of redemption. If you have any doubt, pay attention this week and all around you

you'll see people who are knee-deep in pain and who are barely holding on.

But no matter how bleak it sometimes seems, despair is not the final word. Right through that awareness of our brokenness God speaks a word of promise and hope. Isaiah sings of it so beautifully, and I especially like the way Eugene Peterson translates it *The Message*: “Pay close attention now: I’m creating new heavens and a new earth. All the earlier troubles, chaos, and pain are things of the past, to be forgotten. Look ahead with joy. Anticipate what I’m creating: I’ll create Jerusalem as sheer joy, create my people as pure delight....No more sounds of weeping in the city, no cries of anguish; no more babies dying in the cradle, or old people who don’t enjoy a full lifetime; one-hundredth birthdays will be considered normal—anything less will seem like a cheat....”

“Wolf and lamb will graze the same meadow, lion and ox eat straw from the same trough, but snakes—they’ll get a diet of dirt! Neither animal nor human will hurt or kill anywhere on my Holy Mountain,” says God.

Because life is so fragile in this broken world, God gives us the promise of a day when things will be set right. No more crying or pain or tears. A whole new heaven and a whole new earth. No premature death. No diseases which take away the memory. No children without enough to eat. No relationships that fall apart. And the wolf and the lamb will lie together.

It’s a wonderful promise, but sometimes it seems a bit too good to be true. As Woody Allen quipped, “The wolf and the lamb may lie down together, but the lamb’s not going to get very much sleep.”

Can we admit it? Sometimes the promise doesn’t seem true, because so much around us screams that it’s not. It’s hard to imagine a day when crying will be no more when we hear the cries of so many people. It’s hard to dream of a day when the wolf and the lamb will get along, because we see the conflict with which the world is wracked. It’s hard to imagine a world where all of these promises of God are true, because around us and within us are things which scream that they’re not true. And yet, even though the promise can appear too good to be true, it’s that very promise of God that gives us strength for the living of today.

*The Christian Century* once ran an article about Christian hope. The author indicated that he found that those who had been through the most in life were the very ones most filled with hope. His conclusion was that, far from having their faith shaken by tragedy, those in the midst of pain found more fertile soil for their hope than they had before.

And he wasn’t talking about a shallow, superficial hope that refused to recognize the pain. What he found in these people was a people who were able to imagine otherwise, folks who would not let Isaiah’s vision of a perfect day be forgotten or dismissed.

We are called to be people who imagine otherwise. We are called to be the type of community that bears witness to what God has promised—to hold up before ourselves and the larger world the vision of God’s kingdom of justice and peace which shall have no end. Our call is to be the type of people and congregation that lives out of that vision of what God is doing for us and among us and through us in the midst of this world that God loves and has promised to make new.

Over the last several weeks, you’ve had the opportunity to hear or read stories from

our ministry together that reflect the ways God is using our congregation to change lives. In just a few moments, you'll have the opportunity to offer yourself as you offer your financial commitment for 2011.

At its heart, this act of worship allows us to reflect our trust in the very promise of God to make a whole new world, beginning with us.

After all, every time the offering plate comes by, it's another opportunity to signal our trust in the new world that God is busy bringing into existence.

Every time we put on our t-shirts and head out into this community because we care, it's another witness to how we believe God is moving this world to wholeness.

Every time we commission a youth mission team to go forth from this place to serve—whether in Baja or South Carolina or Georgia or Pittsburgh—we are participating in the promise of God to be there wherever there is brokenness and pain.

*With Gratitude in Our Hearts*, we seek to find ways to respond to the vision of what God is doing among us. We are certainly not a perfect congregation, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that people here are doing their best to live into the promised day Isaiah describes—the day when God takes away all brokenness and pain and suffering—and we do that by responding to the vision of what God is even now doing.

You may have seen in the bulletin this morning the information about the Thanksgiving feast that our middle school youth are planning. As you may remember, they went to South Carolina this summer on a mission trip, and they came back hungry to serve. At their own initiative, they had the idea to share Thanksgiving with our Food Pantry friends, and they're inviting us to help out.

In a real way, they are living into the promise Isaiah describes—of a day when there will be no more crying or pain, and anything which hurts or destroys will be banished.

In 2011, our congregation will be doing many things together in response to what we sense God inviting us to do. We will join boldly with the Spirit's work in the world, and I invite you to respond joyfully by participating in that ministry, and by making a financial commitment in response to God's blessings in your life, and in support of what God is calling us to do.

Ultimately, this is a time to remember the goodness of God and to respond to the gratitude which fills our hearts.