

Isaiah 65:17-25

*Believe*

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In 1940, two years after his premature death at the age of 37, Thomas Wolfe's great American novel, *You Can't Go Home Again*, was published. It was the story of George Webber, a young man who wrote a novel about his hometown in North Carolina. The town is thrilled that one of their own has become a best-selling author. George was putting them on the map. It will be great for business. They were thrilled - until they read it. In his novel, George has revealed all the town secrets. They are exposed – for all their goodness, for all their greed, and for all their human frailties. Every dirty secret is now in the open. Oh, he changed the names but everyone in the town knew the real characters. Needless to say, even George's best friends are furious with him. This sends George into a self-imposed exile first in Europe and later in New York where he battles between cynicism and hope.

George learns what the people of Israel & Judah learned after the demise of the Assyrian & Babylonian empires – you cannot go home again. Those who had been taken from their homes by the two governments finally had a chance to return back to Jerusalem. They had been dreaming about this for years but it did not, many did not have the courage to return and for those who did return? It was not as they expected. The homes that they had built, if they were still standing, were now being occupied by people they did not know and who refused to leave. The vineyards that they had so lovingly planted were either overgrown with weeds or they were now being harvested by strangers who had no intention of giving them back. The positions they left were now being filled by others who did not welcome their return. There was no ticker tape parade and no huge homecoming party. They were no longer wanted in their own land. It was a difficult situation and many chose to just remain where they were. After years of exile, they just did not have the energy to rebuild.

The prophet Isaiah understood this. While they were in exile, the prophets had offered words of hope. Sixth century Isaiah promised the people that God had not abandoned them. There would come a day when they could go home but now that they were home, they found out that home was not what they remembered. So what do you do now? It is a good question to ask. It is a good question to ask as the holidays approach this year. In a month, airports and highways will be full of families returning home for Thanksgiving. It is a good question to ask as we experience the norms in our country being dismantled and our government is shut down for the fourth week. It is a good question to ask as we approach the end of the year and begin thinking about what our church should do next year.

It does not take much imagination to realize that there is a disconnect between the way we think things should be and the way things are. We want our families to gather in celebration but we are often disconnected through divorce, separations, and feuds. We are now fortunate if everyone gets together a few times a year. Many of us remember a

time when politicians actually stood for something besides reelection. Now all we know about the issues are what can be reduced to a five second sound bite. Many of you remember a time when this sanctuary was full. Before COVID, we were worshipping 150 people or more every week. You are not sure what has happened. You are here and you have not changed. When someone asks you to dream about the future, all we do is want to go back in time. We want people to change back to the way they once were. We want the world to go back to the way it once was when we felt in comfortable and safe and in control. We want all those people out there to come back to church the way we like to have church.

So what does Isaiah have to say to us today. He reminds us that God is creating a new heaven and a new earth. Jerusalem is going to be transformed. There will be no more weeping and no more distress. Worship will be a continued celebration. When God is done, there will be no infant mortality. There will be no disease – no cancer, no mental illness, and no heart disease. There will be no more deadly viruses. Everyone will live as long as Mattie did. When God is done, you will eat of the fruit of the vineyard and live in the homes you built. When God is done, the wolf and the lamb will share the same table and a lion will cease to be ferocious. When God is done, you will not reminisce about the good ole days because the day you live in today will be far better than any memory you have of the past. This is not some random promise. God began this new creation in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh.

So if we are the people of promise and if we worship the God of promise then why do we get stuck in the past? Why do we long for yesterday? When someone asks us to dream, why do we talk about what happened yesterday when we had Share Singers and multiple services and Sunday school class in every nook and cranny of the church? When we hope, why is it that we can only hope to return to what once was. Why can't we dream of tomorrow with the same courage of the generations of the past?

Perhaps it is because we cannot remember the realities of yesterday. God's people forgot what drove them into exile in the first place. They had turned away from God. Things might have been good for a certain segment of the population but for others, things were very bad. The leaders were exploiting the poor. They failed to care for the widow, the orphan and the foreigner. They were certainly pious when it came to ritual but not when it boiled down to justice. People were valued for their utility, not for being created in God's image. God's priorities were not God's people's priorities even though they promised they would be. Oh, their synagogues and Temple may have been full every week but they did not come to worship God, they came to worship their own accomplishments. We can be guilty of that even today. When we look back to the glory days of the fifties, we forget about diseases such as polio. When we think about how wonderful life was back in the 1960s, we forget that large percentage of our population was not even allowed to use the same bathrooms as we did. We forgot about the political assassinations and the campus protests. When we talk about how wonderful it would be if we could only get back to 1970, we forget about the Cold War.

Or perhaps it is because we feel safer in the known rather than the unknown. It is safer for us to keep the wolves and the lamb separate. They do not need to lie down together. That is a ridiculous idea. We have zoos and fences for that. It is safer to stay in bad relationships than to risk being alone. It is safer to complain about all the injustices that we witness than to actually take a stand and demand that the world be better. It is safer to demonize those that disagree with us than to question whether or not our ways are fair and just. It is safer to go back to destructive patterns than it is to really understand our own insecurities.

The real reason we do not dream with courage is that we do not want to look in the mirror. To be a part of God's new creation will require us to become new people and we are quite satisfied with the old one. We have a real problem being transformed because to fully turn our lives and our futures over to God will mean that we are no longer in control. We might have to give up something to become a true disciple of Jesus Christ. We might have to let go of something we hold dear in order to embrace something that is actually better for our future. We are supposed to be becoming more like Christ but in order to do so, we have to become healthier – physically, emotionally, and spiritually. To dream with courage means we have to imagine a life that we do not yet have. To dream with courage means we stop thinking that everyone else needs to change and we start asking God to change us. To dream with courage means we stop doing what we have always done because it is safe and comfortable and we start asking God what needs to be done. To dream with courage means that we let go of some of the institutional thinking of the church and think of ways to reach out to others.

There is not a single one of us here who is doing things the way you did forty years ago in business. I remember when the typewriters in our office were replaced with word processors. I remember when our division got its first desktop computer and I was the only one who figured out how to use it. Corporations change to adapt to new environments and new opportunities and markets. Those who refuse to change eventually decline into non-existence. Ask a teacher and see if the classroom is the same as it was twenty-five years ago. Our teachers are constantly involved in continuing education classes to improve their skills. The home environment for students has changed which means the needs of the students have changed. For some the answer has been to go to private school but we believe that every child has potential so as a denomination, we support public schools. Our schools keep trying new ways to help children in this environment driven by social media.

In the past eight years, we have had to learn new skills for ministry and new ways to serve our neighbor. Our food Pantry has moved and grown. Our neighbors can walk the aisles and make choices about what they can use in their homes. We have adapted the ways we do Sue's Table so we can develop relationships with our neighbors that come. Sometimes it is difficult to adapt to change. The Gospel never changes but the way we do ministry does have to adapt to the world in which we live if we want to reach people. We have to have the courage to meet those challenges.

So today, I want to challenge you to dream with courage.

Dream with courage about our world. What can we as citizens of our country and citizens of the Kingdom of God do better. What do we need to address? What can we learn from studying Isaiah and the prophets?

Dream with courage about our community of Camden. How can we make this a place where people want to live?

Dream with courage about our church and the mission God has set before us. How can we address the systems that are causing so many people to need food?

Dream with courage about your relationships. In this polarized society, how can this church bring people together?

And finally, dream with courage about what God can do in your life. Dream and believe God can do miracles among us.