

Work, Worship, and Witness

Isaiah 65:17-25

Psalm 98

II Thessalonians 3:6-13

Luke 21:5-19

A sermon by Rodney W. Kennedy

Let's talk. Here are four readings from the Bible. Why so much scripture? Because it teaches us how to think straight, because by ourselves, caught in our self-imposed web of how we feel, **“by ourselves we think bent, we think crooked”** (NTW). Gerard Manley Hopkins said, **“The Holy Spirit over the bent world broods with warm breast and with Ah! Bright wings!”** And the Spirit broods over us when we read this book, when we struggle over its meanings, to straighten out our bent thinking. This book is not a rule book. It is not a paper Google. No matter how much some of you might want it to be true, you can't run to the Bible and get correct answers to all questions. It is not preachers screaming that this and that is an abomination “The more you insist that you are based on the Bible, the more fissiparous [fi síppəræss] you become; the church splits up into more and more little groups, each thinking that they have got the biblical truth right.” And then you use the Bible to control the church but you call it the “authority of Scripture.” That's not the purpose of this book. It is saying, “Once upon a time.”

Once upon a time, Isaiah the III said, “God intends to create a new earth.” Centuries later, in the book of Revelation, John tells Isaiah's story to the churches: There's going to be a new earth with the river of the water of life running through the city; a new earth with no hunger and no homelessness; a new earth with the tree of life, with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

God knows we could use a new earth. We have pretty much wrecked this one – stripping our purple mountain majesties to mine more coal, turning our alabaster cities into smog-infested gridlocks, and chemically inducing our amber waves of grain. There are a line of chemical plants on the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. It doesn't have a nice name like the Miami Valley. It is called “Cancer Alley.”

A new earth? Where do we place our order? Like the writer of Ecclesiastes, I've tried everything. Went online and checked E-Bay. Went to the flea market down by the world's tallest Jesus. Called Wall Street. Called Congress – not interested. Called the White House – too depressed to talk. According to the promises I just heard in the last three months, a new earth should be a piece of cake for politicians. Desperate for help, I turned to the golden calves, the idols of America: military power, money, technology. No new earth but plenty of prospects for destruction. Well, I found the promise of a new earth in the story of Scripture.

Isaiah's story refutes those violent schemes about Jesus rapturing the church and destroying the world. God is not going to destroy God's world. God is not going to destroy God's creation. “Be glad and rejoice in what I am creating,” says God. The

apostle John tells us that the New Jerusalem comes down from heaven. We are vertically disoriented. We've been taught that we are going up to heaven and here's biblical teaching that says heaven is coming down to us. There's going to be a merger of heaven and earth. And remember all mergers are actually acquisitions. Heaven will acquire earth. I refer you to the prayer we pray every Sunday: **"Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."**

N. T. Wright, New Testament scholar, says in his book, *Simply Christian*, **"Despite what many people think, the point of Christianity is not 'to go to heaven when you die.'** We have work to do here – heavenly work.

Look at the action in Isaiah 65: Building, planting, and laboring. We are tempted to believe that what we do is just ordinary, meaningless work. Tempted to believe that only the folks on television are living the good life. But God has taken ordinary people and made us ambassadors, priests, and kings. There's a divine partnership: God working with us creating a new earth where and 100 is considered young. (I'm really liking this text.)

Once upon a time, a preacher named Paul said, **"If you don't work, you don't eat."** My dad loves this text. He often quoted it at the supper table. Years later, at the same table, I told him that he had taken Paul out of context. He was unmoved by this bit of information. He didn't know that he was being a thorough-going positivist (Someone who imagines he is reading the text straight and anyone who disagrees is using secret assumptions). In his opinion, the context was that I learned that work is a necessary and valuable part of life, and if misreading Paul helped him make his point, he was happy. My dad gets a lot of leeway, but **if you think you can misread Paul** and have this text support a welfare reform agenda, realize that Paul is talking to church members who think Jesus is coming back at any moment. So they have quit working. Paul tells them that their purpose is working here and now. **"Do not grow weary in doing what is right"**.

Once upon a time a songwriter named David said, **"Make a joyful noise to the Lord."** Joyful worship joins hard work to give purpose and rhythm to our lives. When it dawns on us that we are not ordinary, that we are building heaven, that our story is better than all the power games in our world, that we have been given all the power and authority of the persuading Jesus, we will make a joyful sound. Sing a new song to the Lord. Play all the instruments at hand. Blast the trumpets and the horns. Get the whole world to join the choir. In fact, get the whole of creation to join the crescendo.

Once upon a time a doctor, gospel writer named Luke said, "In hard times you will have an opportunity to testify – to tell your story." The story of Luke is that as the gospels tell the story of Jesus we are part of the story. When Jesus sent out his followers to witness he said, **"Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals."** Jesus sent us out without luggage and no expense account because his story is all we needed. We need to recover our confidence in the story and our vocation as God's storytellers.

Tell the world God's story, through song and in sermon, in drama, dance, and in art. Tell it on the run, in whatever forms are available and appropriate. As Jesus puts it, **"So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict."** As the church, sent into the world by Jesus, in his power, and with his authority, we are to tell "our own unique, unscripted improvisation of the story." Tell the story. Tell it. Preach it. Sing it. Dance it. We are not allowed to make up a new story but tell our story based on the previous stories: creation, fall, Israel, and Jesus. Our story is the story of the Spirit-empowered church improvising and performing the gospel.

And, if we are honest, we know that work, worship, and costly witness come out of a cross-scarred backdrop and involve sacrifice on our part. We have all made sacrifices. How much did some of you sacrifice to attend college? One of you told me that you gave your husband a dime every morning as he left for law school so he could buy a cup of coffee. I'm not sure why we are so afraid of sacrifice. When I hear you talk about years of sacrifice, I hear sounds of joy and satisfaction. Isn't it amazing that when we make sacrifices for a greater cause, for a high goal, we experience a sense of joy that lives long after the temporary time of sacrifice.

Bill Gates, in his commencement speech at Harvard in 2007, said, "My mother, who was filled with pride the day I was admitted here—never stopped pressing me to do more for others. A few days before my wedding, she hosted a bridal event, at which she read aloud a letter about marriage that she had written to Melinda. My mother was very ill with cancer at the time, but she saw one more opportunity to deliver her message, and at the close of the letter she said: **"From those to whom much is given, much is expected."**

These are our stories: **Isaiah** says, The wolf and the lamb shall feed together. **Paul** says, Do not be weary in doing what is right. **David** says, Make a joyful noise to the Lord. **Luke** says, "By your endurance you will gain your souls." Let us each offer our sacrifice to the Lord in our work, our worship, and our witness.