

CALVARY BAPTIST CHURCH

"Hope in Hard Times"

Rev. Fred Weimert - November 14, 2010

I heard it on local television news program
on Friday morning...

That Baltimore was rated as the second worst
on a list of cities with people who were
judged to be the ugliest ...

And that story was confirmed
by an article in the *"Washington Post"*.

According to *"Travel and Leisure"* magazine

Out of the 35 cities rated
with the prettiest people there were
Savannah and Charleston as one and two.
and the last two on the list...

so I guess in turn... the ugliest
were Baltimore at 34
and Memphis at 35...

I took some comfort in that
Washington DC wasn't much better than we were.

It wasn't what I needed to hear
at the same time that I was learning
that the Ravens had lost
the night before to the Atlanta, Falcons...
By the way Atlanta finished 27...
so they are pretty ugly too,
but they still beat us in football...
So I was hardly happy.

As I said *"Travel and Leisure"* magazine was the one who did the rating...
and I am cynical enough to believe
that these ratings had something to do
with the number of subscribers
that they have in different towns.

I do seem to remember having a roommate
when I was in the Navy
who subscribed to Travel and Leisure magazine...
or stole it from an airplane.
And that may have been

when I was living just south of Savannah.
 So the magazine may be more popular there.

I can promise you that I am never going to buy
 anything with the "*Travel and Leisure*" name on it...
 and I doubt my cousins and nephew
 who live in Memphis will buy it either.
 I just hate to think what my Auntie Ruthie
 My Mother's sister,
 a very pretty southern lady,
 would have said about all this...
 She lived in Memphis until she died...
 and I am thankful that she is dead,
 otherwise this news would have killed her.
 She would have blamed it
 on the damnable Yankees...
 How could Chicago be ranked 15...
 She had moved her family
 out of Chicago
 because they were so ugly there.
 That isn't really true.

But it is all so stupid...
 I did run over and look at the magazine,
 and saw their destination cities...
 Beijing, Boston Buenos Aires,
 Cape town, Hong Kong, Las Vegas...
 and on and on, and on...
 I haven't seen many of those cities,
 but I can promise you
 they have some beautiful people...
 and some who are not.
 And sometimes the beautiful people,
 aren't really worth being around...
 And sometimes the not so beautiful people
 are.
 Any time human beings are in the mix...
 there is a chance that something ugly can break out.

I guess that's why
 when people, especially Christians
 read the 65th chapter of Isaiah...
 we get the feeling
 that it is talking about heaven...
 a non earthly realm...
 where people will simply sit

and listen to God.

I am not sure that was Isaiah's plan.

I believe Isaiah's plan was
to get the Jewish people,
who were living comfortably in Babylon,
To take a trip back to Jerusalem,
and never come back to Babylon.

So Isaiah gives Jerusalem
a little bit of a "Travel and Leisure" spin...
This city is a joy,
a delight...
There is no crying there...
No foreclosures...
It's a veritable Shangri-La.

Hear now as Isaiah gives his best Rick Steves
Israel/Jerusalem/Holy Land travelogue.

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.*

Here ends the reading.

Sadly when we read this passage,
as Christians,

we think of Isaiah's opening words
as they are quoted, or reinterpreted,
in the 21st chapter of the Revelation of John:
*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth;
for the first heaven and the first earth
had passed away,
and the sea was no more.
And I saw the holy city,
the new Jerusalem,
coming down out of heaven from God,
prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*
(Rev. 21: 1-2)

That's our version of this passage,

but it is quite different from Isaiah's words...

For Isaiah the first heaven and first earth
don't "pass away,"
instead they just aren't remembered anymore...
And Jerusalem doesn't "come down out of heaven"
It is simply created by God as a joy.

Isaiah's purpose here was different from the theology of Jeremiah
that we heard in a reading a few weeks ago:

*But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile,
and pray to the LORD on its behalf,
for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jer. 29: 7)*

Nor was it Isaiah's purpose

to get these Jewish people living in Babylon
to give up on life
stop working
"Hang up their lyres." (Psalm 137)
and just sit back to wait to go to heaven...
or wait for God to build this new Jerusalem...
notice it says

They shall build...
They shall plant...
They shall not labor in vain...
They shall bear offspring.

This isn't about travel and leisure,

but about travel and work...
 It is about being involved in life.
 Will it all be a joy...
 Not if the last verse is true...
 The serpent is still there...
 eating dust.
 This isn't heaven,
 but it is about returning
 with the people of God
 to be the people of God...
 in community...
 in the real world.

I picked up a copy of Phillip Yancey's new book,
What Good is God?... In Search of a Faith that Matters,
 and it talks about his travels
 and his search for a real and significant Christian faith.
 Early on in the book Yancey,
 who has written several books on struggling with God,
 was invited by a Chaplain at Virginia Tech
 to come to the campus memorial service
 and speak to students and faculty
 about the tragic shootings there...
 just a few days earlier...
 32 students and faculty murdered...
 along with the shooter.

His talk was excellent,
 and toward the end he said:
 *"I would like to promise you a long life
 and a pain-free life,
 but I cannot do so.
 God has not made that guarantee
 and not even Jesus was granted those favors.
 Rather, the Christian view of the world
 reduces to a simple formula.
 The world is good.
 The world is fallen.
 The world will be redeemed.
 Creation, Fall, Redemption –
 that's the Christian story in a nutshell."
 (pg. 30)*

It is also a story we got from Judaism...
 We differ on how the redemption takes place,
 but the source of the redemption
 is God for both of us...
 the same God who "in the beginning"

made creation good...
 and worth living in...
 striving in.
 in the midst of our sadly fallen history...
 in the midst of our living...
 God brings about redemption
 and opens our eyes to see
 in the midst of suffering...
 that life is still good.
 Not everybody has reached that point
 so suffering goes on,
 and good people continue to suffer
 because of evil
 but part of what makes
 those people good
 is their ability
 to see the goodness of God
 in the land of the living...
 or just the possibility
 of the goodness of God
 in the land of the living.
 So such people strive for good
 even in the face of evil.

Another book I have come across lately
 is a new biography of the German Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer.
 Bonhoeffer was killed by the Nazi's
 for his participation in the plot to kill Adolph Hitler.
 In one section of the book that was of particular interest to me
 was the section that discussed how
 in 1939
 arrangements had been made
 for Bonhoeffer to escape from Germany
 and come to New York City...
 to teach at Union Seminary,
 and Bonhoeffer did get away from Germany,
 the war,
 and the danger of his being killed
 for his views on the draft
 the Nazis
 and Hitler.

I was interested in the section,
 because I thought he had come here for a year or more.
 In truth he was here, in the US, for less than a month,
 And during that time
 His diary entries indicate

that he was safe but miserable.

In one entry he tells of going to a dinner party
and talking with a woman there:

*"We sat for an hour and chatted,
not in a silly way, true,
but about things which left me completely cold –
whether it is possible to get a good musical education
in New York,
about the education of children,
etc. etc.,
and I thought how usefully I could be spending these hours in Germany.
I would gladly have taken the next ship home.*

*This inactivity,
or rather actaivity in unimportant things,
is quite intolerable
when one thinks of the brethren
and of how precious time is. "* pg. 330,
Bonhoeffer Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy,
by Eric Metaxas

A biblical passage Bonhoeffer said he pondered during that time
was from Isaiah 28...

"The one who believes does not flee." (28: 16)
it is not how my Bible translates the passage,
but it certainly contributed to his decision to return.

And in a way it may be the essence of this passage we read
from Isaiah 65...

The people Isaiah was speaking to hadn't fled to Babylon,
they were taken there as captives,
but they had also become captivated
by the beauty of Babylon.

And Isaiah was calling them back...
back to where they would be working together
building together,
serving God together.

And that is our task as well...
not to flee from evil,
or fear tasks which appear insurmountable,
"The one who believes does not flee."
When times are hard,
may we be that person
those people...
Who bear up...
Who hold together...
So may we live. Amen.