

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, November 13, 2016
Rev. Andrew Reid
Isaiah 65:17-25; Isaiah 12; Luke 21:5-19
“Strength, shield, salvation, or
What do you do when things don't work out the way you hoped?”

Before anyone asks, I chose the first part of my sermon title for today several weeks ago. I did not choose it after the news that emerged from the United States on Tuesday night. However, I confess that after the news that emerged from the United States on Tuesday night, I did add the second part of my sermon title for today.

But please do not draw any conclusion about my political leanings from that statement. The pulpit is not the place for a preacher to promote any political party or position. And even if it were, I am not foolish enough or arrogant enough to think that any sermon I might preach could sway an election anywhere, let alone in a whole 'nother country. And of course, living in Canada, I do not have nearly as much invested in the American presidential election as some of you and all the others who are US citizens.

But the ripples from Tuesday's election results are still being felt, not just in the United States but all over the world, as people try to process them and work out what the implications might be. I have to say that last Wednesday felt very like how the day after the Brexit referendum felt in the UK. For some it was a day of celebration and exultation; for others (almost the same number of people, if the popular vote is a guide), it was a day of deep sadness and disbelief. I can't help feeling that no matter which side you were on, Democrat or Republican, and no matter where in the world you live, things maybe didn't work out quite the way you had expected and perhaps hoped.

So what do you do when things don't work out the way you hoped? Many people simply despair. As I believe many people despaired on Wednesday. People who had worked and campaigned against sexism, racism, prejudice; people who had dreamed of the day when a woman would break that ultimate glass ceiling; people who had dreamed of national unity, and international cooperation, and people of different races and religions and genders and sexual orientations working together: many of them felt that it had all been in vain, that their causes had been crushed, that there was no more hope. And they despaired.

Again, please do not draw any conclusion about my political leanings when I say that. I am not criticizing Donald Trump: I am trying to focus on the reactions that some people felt who were involved in and affected by the election. I know of one person who said that Wednesday felt like a day of mourning, such was the sense of gloom that seemed to descend.

What can we who are people of faith say in that context? Do we have a word of hope for times when things don't work out the way people had hoped, especially things in which people had invested a great deal of themselves? Surely we do.

Isaiah the prophet spoke to a people in despair. Things had not worked out the way they had hoped. Their land had been invaded and conquered by the Babylonian empire; the people had been exiled in Babylon as slaves; the Temple in Jerusalem and the city of Jerusalem and the whole land of Judah lay in ruins. In the aftermath of all that, there had been a slipping away from God and from godly living. The last few chapters of the book of Isaiah paint a picture of a land and a nation where wickedness, bloodshed, injustice, false worship, oppression, drunken leaders, and profaning of the Sabbath were everywhere. Only a handful of people had remained faithful.

But the Persian empire under Cyrus had recently defeated the Babylonian empire, and the exiles had been set free. Isaiah was speaking to the first group of returnees who were faced with the enormity of the destruction

of all that they held dear, and the enormity of the task of rebuilding that they now faced.

And he promised them that God was still in control. And that God was about to create new heavens and a new earth; that what they had gone through would not be remembered or come to mind anymore; that Jerusalem would be a joy, and its people a delight; that the sound of weeping or cries of distress would no longer be heard; that people would live long and enjoy the fruits of their labours; that prayers would be answered; that natural enemies would live together in peace; and that there would be no more pain or destruction on God's holy mountain.

And Jesus himself foretold a tumultuous time. The Temple in all its beauty and splendour would be thrown down. False teachers would arise. There would be wars and insurrections, nations and kingdoms would rise one against another, there would be earthquakes, famines, plagues, portents and signs from heaven, arrests, imprisonments, persecution, betrayals, and executions.

But, for Isaiah and for Jesus and for us, one truth stands firm: no matter what happens, no matter what we may go through, no matter how deep the despair that we are feeling, God is still in control. For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered

or come to mind. Isaiah 65:17-25. 18... not a hair of your head will perish. 19 By your endurance you will gain your souls Luke 25:18-19.

So, the question again: what do you do when things don't work out the way you hoped? Answer: you do exactly what you would have done if things had worked out exactly the way you had hoped. You follow Christ. You worship God. You serve others.

And you do that because you believe – no, because you know – that God has something great and good in mind for people of faith who follow Christ and worship God and serve others.

I have spoken before, but not for some time, of Diana Butler Bass. She is an Episcopalian, a historian, and one of the most perceptive and, I believe, most influential, observers of the state of the church in western society in the 21st century. Something she posted on social media on Thursday is just too lovely and too powerful not to close with it:

So, this just happened. Day 2 of Trump.

After 40 hours of teary self-imposed exile, I left my house and went to my local Starbucks.

"Can I help you?" asked the 20-something barista in lightly accented English, that warm sound of a native Spanish speaker smoothing over our rough Germanic consonants.

I started to cry. Tears-down-the-cheeks crying.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"I'm ... I'm ... so, so sorry. Trump." I could barely say his name. "I didn't vote for him. I would never. I'm so sorry."

Through the sniffing, I choked out, "I love that you are an American. You make us stronger, better."

"Thank you." Then, she said softly. "I know. No one here is happy. No one here voted for him."

She gazed into my eyes, brown and blue meeting each other in a knowing and surprisingly empowering moment.

She reached over the counter and took my hand, holding it with assurance. "You know what?" she continued, "Whatever happens, God is in control. God is here. With us. God is with us."

"What?" I replied.

"God. That's what I keep saying to my friends. God is here. God is with us. With God, everything will be alright. God knows all things, God is in all things. God is with us."

"You," I said back, "are an angel."

"No," she replied quietly, "I'm just faithful. God is with us."