

“Already and Not Yet”  
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
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Isaiah 65:12-25  
Luke 21:5-19

The bible is full of things that aren't possible, aren't real, and/or didn't happen.

You may think I am talking about the earth and its inhabitants being created in 6 days, an ark sheltering animals of every species during a flood, a talking ass, or water turned into wine. All these stories, or myths, are recorded in the bible. But I'm not going to speak about these events today to you today.

What I want to talk to you about is a wolf eating together with a lamb— and presumably, the lamb isn't the wolf's meal. I want to talk about vegetarian lions. I want to talk about a world where we will not hurt or destroy each other. This is what God promises through the prophet in Isaiah.  
*Can this be real?*

I saw an article in *The Guardian* last week, about a diver off the shores of Vancouver Island, in the waters of the Salish Sea. This diver is a teacher by profession, but as a hobby she loves exploring the ocean floor, and this time had brought her friends SCUBA diving with her, to share the Pacific's beauty and with hopes that they might spy a giant Pacific octopus in its den. They were excited to see one, out of its den, and it approached the teacher's friend, gently swishing its tentacles over her mask. The teacher started taking pictures, but then the octopus turned toward her. Closer and closer it came, until its tentacles were fully embracing her. “It was giving me a hug,” she described. The octopus kept interacting with this teacher, for more than 40 minutes: inspecting her mask and dive equipment, fiddling with her camera and changing the lights on it. The whole time the octopus kept its deep red color, never changing into the gray tone the animals exhibit when feeling fearful or aggressive.

As I read the article, I found it hard to believe, until I clicked on the linked video. Sure enough, this rosy-red octopus was hugging and, it seemed, playing with the diver.

Maybe the octopus wasn't too smart; after all, while this teacher-diver in particular could be considered a friend— she is a conservationist and wants to educate others about the dangers of climate warming— humans on the whole are no friend to octopi. Some of us eat them. We destroy their habitat by dumping plastics into the ocean. Our reliance on fossil fuels causes the warming of oceans, tipping the balance of the delicate ecosystem that is their home, causing algae to suffocate their eggs, and their food sources to disappear.

If I were the octopus, I don't think I would hug a human diver.

We know the way the world works: a good day for the wolf is a bad day for the lamb. It's not in a lion's nature to be vegetarian. And as much as humanity has toyed with the idea of peace and justice, it remains out of our grasp.

The bible is full of things that aren't possible, aren't real, or just didn't happen. And yet, I do believe that the prophet is telling us something worth believing, *even worth investing our hope*—as impossible as it may be.

Biblical Scholar Katie Givens Kime notes, "In the Hebrew, the ambiguity of verb tense has prompted a wide variation in translations: God will create, God creates, God is creating, God is about to create new heavens and a new earth. This is a moment when the original language offers us a fresh view. The timing of God's new creation is ambiguous, a word that comes from the Latin *ambo* meaning "both." God's new creation is happening both now and in the future."

In other words, God is doing a new thing, and it is *already* unfolding in you, in me, and in the church. Here in this place, we step into that vision that God has cast for us. We try it on for size, we sing about it and pray for it, and rehearse our lives in this community, for bringing it into the wider world— which God is also readying for a new day.

But if Isaiah feels too full of starry-eyed, impossible dreams for you, thank God we have a hard dose of reality with Luke, to bring us down to earth, where we can trudge in the dross of our own suffering and admit how much we have failed at bringing forth the peaceable, holy mountain that the prophet generations before had proclaimed.

We don't even need to go all the way back to Jesus' time to see what he predicted in Luke would be true. Hello, pandemic? Wars? Turn on the news any day and you'll be reminded of how elusive that holy mountain of God's is, where they neither hurt nor destroy.

Speaking of the news, perhaps you like me were pretty tied to the news last week as we awaited election results. I have a history of optimism, and in election times this optimism can cause great strife when the people I hope to lead this country do not get elected. So on Monday, someone I know who is about as cynical as I am optimistic, told me, just go to bed early. You know it's not going to turn out well for us. You're better off if you hope for the worst. She didn't add, "who knows, you may be surprised." But I heeded that advice, and in the morning, I was pretty surprised. I talked to this friend the next day, who triumphantly said, "See? Pessimism works!"

Now you should understand that the writer of Luke already knew some things would in fact happen. Luke was written *after* the second Jerusalem temple had already been destroyed, as Jesus had predicted it would. He was describing things that the author of the gospel already knew would take place.

As Jesus described, ominously, to those who admired the Temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God,, "There will come the day when not one stone will

be left upon another. All will be thrown down.” In addition to that, Jesus predicted war, earthquakes, famine, plagues, betrayals by family and friends, and that some of Jesus’ followers will be put to death.

Perhaps we are similar. Do you see how beautiful this sanctuary is? Have you noticed how the light filters through the stained glass? Have you run your fingers across the smooth tops of the pews, thinking about how many backs rested against them, people who prayed, and laughed, and sang, and maybe cried, just as you have? Do you see the lofty ceiling, the strong wooden rafters, and the cross suspended above the choir loft, once again fully lit, but now with eco-friendly bulbs? Have you seen the variety of groups our building has embraced within its warmth and welcome: English Conversation Classes; recovery groups; music lovers at Jazz Jam, which returned Friday night; and on Tuesday, we’ll welcome people who give their blood to literally save other peoples’ lives, as we have committed to do every month.

The truth is, however, that although our sanctuary building is 120 years old this year, there will come the day when no stone will be left on stone— whether that’s 100 years from now, or 50, more, or less, we cannot tell. The brutal and honest truth is that the Presbyterian Church, like all mainline Protestant churches, as well as many Catholic and evangelical ones too, is on the decline. We can fantasize about all the people who will come and discover the good news we have to share, how much they will enjoy our good music, how they will bring their kids to the Sunday School with its dedicated and caring teachers. But unless we can also offer them a story about how this community impacts our lives, unless we invite them with the same kind of welcome Jesus offered, they will never show up.

How can we be realistic about our future, and still have hope in what it may bring?

When the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed the second time, Judaism was not destroyed with it. Christianity was not destroyed with it. But both religions were changed. I wish I could tell you how the church of the future will change. It needs to change. But just how isn’t exactly clear to me. I do see however that the world around us is changing, quicker than I can keep up.

Which keeps me longing to go to God’s holy mountain: a place of peace. A place of connection. A place of healing. A place of joy. And I think our practice at church each Sunday, and the ways it guides our lives on the weekdays between, practices a pathway to get there. Church is an oasis where we can drink living water and be fed from the bread of life. It is where loving your neighbor as yourself is a guiding rule, which we get to test drive with one another. It is where we can trust in something bigger than ourselves to have a vision of goodness that we can’t come up with, and certainly cannot achieve, on our own. It is where mistakes are cradled in mercy, and our failures are smoothed over with love. It is where love transforms us into better versions of ourselves. It is where the acceptance of Jesus reminds us that we belong, and calls us to radical acceptance of one another. It is where we keep insisting on impossible things, so that the hungry can be fed, the naked clothed, and so that all have the chance to participate in the world God is shaping.

