

New & Improved

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Text: 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.

SEE ADS ALL the time for products that are supposedly "new and improved," and I'm always a little bit skeptical. Sometimes the only thing that's new is the packaging. New Windex leaves a streak-free shine pretty much like old Windex. New Speed Stick gives me long-lasting protection from odor and wetness pretty much like old Speed Stick. New Palmolive softens my hands while I do the dishes pretty much like old Palmolive.

And then there are products that are definitely new, but not only are they not better, they're actually worse. Remember New Coke? The slogan was: "The best just got better." Or not. Remember Heinz EZ Squirt purple and green ketchup? The slogan was: "It's fun for your food." And it was also disgusting

But here's the thing: no matter how skeptical I am when I see those ads, I still get the urge to run out and buy those products. Why do you think that is? Is it just me or is there something magical about those words, "new and improved"? Do they cast

some kind of spell on us, so we just can't help ourselves?

There's a saying in marketing: "New is the copilot of interesting." I read that in an article about why companies are always coming out with new and improved products. It comes down to the simple fact that human beings are irresistibly drawn to that promise, even when we know it's probably bogus.

Or at least that's how it is when it comes to new and improved Pop Tarts or new and improved Miracle Whip. But when it comes to Isaiah's new and improved heavens and a new and improved earth, the rules of marketing don't seem to apply. Not because the vision Isaiah offers isn't genuinely new—it's definitely more than just packaging. And not because it isn't truly an improvement—the world he describes is definitely better than the world we live in now. But because it demands something from us—something more than just tossing a bag of chips or a box of cereal into a grocery cart.

THE vision Isaiah offers is a whole new day when God's justice will prevail, and everything that's wrong with the world will finally be made right. Which may seem too good to be true, pure fantasy, something only the most naive person would think was possible. But Isaiah wasn't naive. He didn't have any illusions about the world he lived in. In the chapters leading up to this passage, he describes in detail the corruption and the violence and the exploitation that went on in his day.

So, this isn't some pipe dream. This is, first of all, an indictment. Because you can't talk about how great things are going to be in the future without calling attention to how bad things are in the present. When Isaiah says that one day there will no longer be "an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime," he's pointing out the fact that in his day, the most vulnerable people in society—the very young and the very old—were being exploited and neglected. And that really hasn't changed much, has it? We live in a world where infant mortality rates vary depending on your zip code and your income level. We live in a world where many seniors can't afford their medications and have to choose between food and healthcare.

And when Isaiah says that one day people will "build houses and inhabit them" and "plant vineyards and eat their fruit," he's pointing out the fact that in his day the poor didn't benefit from their own labor—instead, their labor benefited the rich. And that really hasn't changed much either. We live in a world where wages have stagnated while CEO compensation has reached obscene levels. We live in a world where the wealth gap keeps growing, and the American dream is out of reach for more and more people.

So Isaiah's vision is, first of all, an indictment—a charge leveled at his world and ours. But it's also a challenge. Because if there's ever going to be a new day, if things are ever going to be made right, the world is going to have to change. And that means people are going to have to change. People are going

to have to start thinking about what's good for others instead of only thinking about what's good for themselves. They're going to have to start thinking about the choices they make and how they impact their neighbors. They're going to have to start asking themselves, "What privileges and comforts do I have that come at the cost of someone else's suffering?"

And that's a lot to ask. It was a lot to ask in Isaiah's day, and it's a lot to ask in our day. Isaiah's vision challenges us to acknowledge that we contribute to the way things are, and to make real changes to how we live, and to help build a more just future, one responsible decision at a time. Maybe that means buying fair trade coffee even though it costs a little more. Maybe it means factoring in ethics when we decide what companies to invest in. Maybe it means choosing money less often and compassion more often.

AND how do we do that? How do we take Isaiah's vision to heart? Well, here's how I see it: If we can put our trust in the words we read on a box of laundry detergent or a tube of toothpaste, if we can believe promises we know are probably bogus, surely, we can put our trust in the promise we hear in this passage. Because here's the thing: Isaiah's promise isn't just the promise of a human being who may or may not be trustworthy, who may or may not be just trying to sell us something. This is a promise that comes from God.

And how do we know that God is trustworthy? We know by looking at who God is in scripture—the God who created the heavens and the earth, the God who brought Israel out of slavery, the God who's been faithful generation after generation. And we know by looking at our own lives. By remembering the times when God has been faithful to us. The times when we felt lost and God provided direction. The times when we felt alone and God gave us comfort. The times when we didn't think we could go on and God gave us strength. And we know by seeing God's faithfulness in this community—in the way we care for each other, support each other, and help each other through hard times.

So, Isaiah's vision is a word of indictment—calling out injustice. And it is a word of challenge—calling us to change how we live. But ultimately, it's a word of encouragement—from a God we can depend on, a God we can trust to make good on a promise: a world that really is new and improved. Not just packaging, not just a gimmick, but the real thing. The question is: Can we believe in that promise—enough to change our lives and live with hope?

Pray with me:

Faithful God, we've heard your promise today—the promise of a world made new, where tears are wiped away, where justice flows like water, and where all your children flourish. Help us to believe in that promise and trust in the One who made it.

When we feel discouraged or doubtful, remind us of who you are and who you've always been, and give us strength to build a more just future one loving, responsible choice at a time. We put our faith in you, O God. Now send us out to live like it. Amen.