

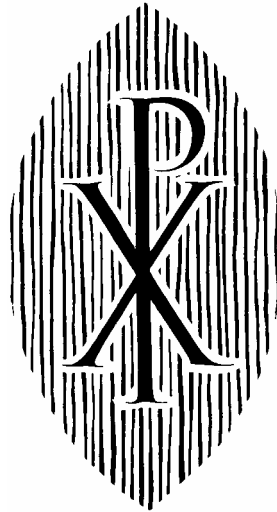
First United Methodist Church

November 21, 2004

Scripture – Isaiah 65:17-25

Sermon – *First Methodist at the Crossroads of Charlotte*

Preacher – George Thompson



I was born in this city, ironically named after King George's bride. My Scottish ancestry identified with the hornet's nest rebellion against the crown, and my Scottish family's patriarch came over from Rutherford County to do battle at King's Mountain. Just as Bethlehem and the village of Bethany were referred to as "the daughters of Jerusalem," so the hamlets surrounding Charlotte have always gravitated toward this central city of the Carolinas. My childhood was spent in the *daughter* town of Forest City. Thus, Charlotte was our family's Jerusalem, with the *Observer's* editorials the fodder for morning conversation, street our temple mount, and First Methodist (the place of my baptism) our urban temple.

By being reared in a small town, I have always been fascinated by cities. Some pundits have posited the notion that this month's national election demonstrated the vast ideological chasm between rural/small towns and urban America. I cannot endorse that simplified assessment. While neither country nor city need be romanticized, the city should not be shunned or vilified by people of faith. Christ, whose ministry was concentrated within the agrarian villages of Galilee, always casts his eyes toward Jerusalem. He came to save the inhabitants of both.

When I began my ministry in rural parishes of this conference, I journeyed to the city during several summers for continuing education experiences. Specifically, I entered the cloister of Union Theological Seminary on Broadway in Manhattan. I was able to study the Gospel of John through the lectures of the Catholic scholar Raymond Brown and gain insights into the Hebrew prophets through the lectures of James Sanders or Samuel Terrian. I experienced the memorable era of "Shakespeare in the Park" and some remarkable Broadway plays. In these last

three years I have thought about the several summers in which I rode the subway down to where construction crews were building the World Trade Center Towers: When it was completed, I especially remember looking way down at nearby Wall Street. Nestled at the end of a cavern of buildings was one of my favorite landmarks—little Trinity Episcopal. It was common knowledge in the city that the original planners wanted to build the towers at that spot. The church trustees merely replied, “Money cannot purchase this church.”

The twin towers are gone. Trinity Church remains. Its’ façade was rattled. Its exterior was covered with debris. But Trinity Church, with its little graveyard containing the remains of Alexander Hamilton, and other American icons, stands steadfastly.

Some congregations just stay downtown because Christ wants his servant leaders to remain in the secular city as the symbol of resurrection hope. Proudly the aging blocks of granite that hold together First Methodist on Tryon Street continue to remind Charlotteans that God loves this city and its people. With zeal these church towers peel out the message of promise, even as they did that day on June 6th, 1944, when my mother knelt at this altar praying for the brave troops, including her three brothers. First United Methodist on Tryon Street remains a symbol of God’s grace and blessed assurance in a turbulent world of fear and uncertainty.

Several of Israel’s prophets were men of the city. One of them lived in Jerusalem during the sixth century before Christ. He spoke his oracles and composed his poetry, during or near the year 530 B.C. Like all the great prophets, his legacy was poetry. His poetry described his vision for the city, the Babylonian armies. The temple of Solomon had been pulverized generations ago. The priestly Isaiah had seen it coming. Generations in exile had now passed. The Persian Monarch Cyrus had trampled upon the arrogance of Babylon and liberated the Jews who lived there. Ancient Babylon, where the prophet lived with his exiled people, is precisely the location of modern Iraq. Nehemiah and Ezra had led a movement of urban renewal, attempting to rebuild downtown. These were the Hugh McCall and Ed Crutchfields of sixth century Jerusalem. But alas, the city’s grandeur akin to the days of King David was a distant memory. The news temple could not be constructed. So, this poet who walked the streets of Jerusalem lived in a time of economic hardship, political instability, the charred remains of a demolished city, and the burden of national shame.

We call him Trito-Isaiah, this author of chapters 40 through 66. But, he was merely a poet who walked onto the stage of history, uttered his visionary poetic lines, and then disappeared.

But his words live forever. When Jesus pronounced his mission statement in Nazareth, “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed ...,”¹ he read from the Hebrew manuscript of Trito-Isaiah.

A few weeks ago Ivan Peden and I were among the United Methodists who participated in a fascinating project called “**Crossroads Charlotte.**” The project is sponsored by the Foundation for the Carolinas. Community leaders assembled to hear the recitation of four scenarios: four very different visions of Charlotte in the year 2015. The first is doom and gloom, the banking establishments have departed from the city. Racial strife has accelerated. Crime is

rampart. Hope has evaporated. In 2015 we are “**Fortress Charlotte.**” The second scenario is promising – in 2015 we are a “**Class Act.**” The third scenario is entitled “**The Beat Goes On**” – not much change. The fourth – “**Eye to Eye.**” We envision in 2015 that Charlotte has planned carefully and compassionately. Power is shared among the races. We look at each other, eye to eye.

Which of these four scenarios will be Charlotte’s future? Well, of course, the answer is the present moment.

Following each story, Ivan and I listened to the voice of a different poet, tossing out images that interpret the potential future of our Queen City.

Trito-Isaiah was the poet of Crossroads Jerusalem. But his poetry provided the vision of a new Jerusalem. What he saw captured the imagination of his despondent nation. What he saw became so precious that every word was sewn into the fabric of a scroll and preserved for over two thousand years in a cave at Qumran. What he saw was a vision of the kingdom of God. What he saw was described in poetry and memorized by Jesus of Nazareth. It became the cornerstone of his teachings. His words are the poetic description of the kingdom of God – the city of God.

What are the key components of this city of God that Isaiah believed God is building?

1. God is building a community of praise and happiness.

“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.”²

God wants the city of Charlotte to be a city of joy and harmony – not divisiveness and strife. The decisions we make now about our public schools, the revitalization of urban neighborhoods, and the provision of affordable housing will define the Charlotte our children will inherit in 2015.

Charlotte still carries the scars of a vicious racism. But, now and again, visionary leaders have done the right things. When the lunch-counter demonstrations began the civil rights movement in Greensboro, Stan Brookshire (a Methodist layman) invited several businessmen and black clergy to lunch with him downtown. Now, who was going to throw the mayor out of their restaurants? Charlotte leaders decided that segregated lunch counters and businesses would be abolished in this city.

According to a major study of Charlotte, we are a city of great social capital; but we are ironically a city with very low racial trust – one of the worst in this nation! Servant leaders at First United Methodist are aligned with Isaiah’s vision to change this flow in Charlotte’s identity.

2. The city of God provides for children and the aged.

Isaiah's poetry resonates with assurance: "No more shall there be in (the city) an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who eddies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed."³

I was once a child in the nursery of First Methodist when G. Ray Jordan and Howard Wilkinson were pastors here. Ivan Peden beams each time he tells me of another infant baptism at First Church. The sound of children has returned to these hallways. This is a church that cares for those in the dawn of life (children), those in the margins of life (the poor), and persons in the twilight of life (senior citizens).

3. In the city of God there is affordable housing for all.

"They shall build houses and inhabit them... They shall not build and another inhabit..."⁴

On October 30 the *Observer* carried the story of Gerald Hixson, age 60. Homeless. On the streets of our city for 18 months. Hixson, with a simple act of story-telling, breaks the stereotype of an affluent culture's image of the homeless. He is intelligent, resourceful, and compassionate of others. A man whose plight is not easy to explain. He wrote: "I had the easy-out option of moving to another city and entering another shelter. But then I must give up my friends and church family at First United Methodist uptown and start all over again."⁵

Yes, a church family is the most precious possession any of us has. Eternal salvation and the body of Christ is the source of hope for all of us. Only the poor in spirit really understand this. Only poverty of the spirit can bring the arrogant and wealthy to kneel before the fact of one's finitude.

In the city of God, where the church really becomes the church, none of our many Gerald Hixson's will remain homeless. If, instead of our little boxes for children at Christmas, every church in Charlotte adopted a homeless family, we would end homelessness in this city.

4. In the city of God, there is no hunger.

"They shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit...they shall not plant and another eat."⁶

For several years I waited on tables for the mid-day feeding at Greensboro Urban Ministry. I learned much about the eating habits of the poor. We conducted worship for those who could stay for a little while after the feeding. For the first time, through the voices of the poor, I learned how really to pray the words, "give us this day our daily bread." These are people who are truly grateful for every meal.

5. In the city of God there is a redemptive family support system.

"They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be the offspring of the blessed of the Lord, and their children with them."⁷

A few seasons ago on Christmas Eve Providence UMC prepared for the evening's guests at Room-In-The-Inn. We conducted three services that evening. But when I went down-stairs to greet the homeless guests, Jesus came. He came in the form of a homeless young woman who carried her little baby.

Jesus keeps on showing up at church. But he has no sense of propriety. Jesus keeps coming in the wrong doors and arriving while we are arguing over church budgets and wringing our hands over issues of survival. But Jesus comes, despite our distracted agenda. He calls us into being a new and distinct family.

6. Jesus comes to bring peace to our city.

“The wolf and lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like an ox....”⁸

When the church begins living into the vision of the City of God, lives are transformed. Peace presides over the city. Race and class and rancor dissolve.

Envision a Charlotte in which First UMC is known by all as the caring, reconciling community of faith. We are a safe sanctuary, where people come to experience the hospitality of Christian love. This church provides the atmosphere of a new Charlotte, with a new vision of racial trust and cultural inclusiveness. We have become a center of elevated religious art, drama, and music. We have become the one place where rich and poor, with a great variety of ethnic diversity, gather at the one table of our Lord! We are the church that enable a city to enjoy its sports, but with a mature context, so that the violence that erupted this week at a basketball game in Detroit is unthinkable in the city of Charlotte because a core of people in down-town Charlotte model the spirit of God's Peaceable Kingdom.

Then we can authentically pray the prayer of Margaret Clarkson:

“Our cities cry to you, O God, from out their pain and strife,
You made us for yourself alone, but we choose alien life.
Our goals are pleasure, gold and power; injustice stalks our earth;
In vain we seek for rest, for joy, for sense of human worth.

“O healing Savior, Prince of Peace, salvation's Source and Sun,
For you our broken cities cry—O come, Lord Jesus, come!
With truth your royal diadem, with righteousness your rod,
O come, Lord Jesus, bring to earth the City of our God!”⁹

Footnotes:

1. Isaiah 61:1 NRSV
2. Isaiah 65: 17-18 NRSV
3. Isaiah 65: 20 NRSV
4. Isaiah 65: 21a and 22a NRSV
5. *The Charlotte Observer*, October 30, 2004, Carolina Living Section, page 1, Section C.
6. Isaiah 65: 21b and 22b NRSV
7. Isaiah 65: 23 NRSV
8. Isaiah 65: 25
9. Margaret Clarkson, "Our Cities Cry to You," Wheaton, Illinois: Hope Music Publishing, 1987.