

# The World You've Always Wanted

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A couple of weeks ago I had the joy and the privilege to travel to England and to attend the dedication of the C.S. Lewis memorial in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey. Some of you may be aware that I am a fan of C.S. Lewis – and so when the opportunity presented itself I took it and experienced one of the most memorable worship services of my life. They closed Westminster Abbey for the service and so we gave thanks to God on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Lewis' death (he died the same day as John F. Kennedy) and remembered with great appreciation the inestimable difference he made in the world through his thought and writing. I can go on and on about the experience, but that's not why I bring it up. I bring it up because while I was there in London I had a morning free to run over to the National Gallery and to lose myself in the wonderful French Impressionist section of the museum. In any art museum that's where you are likely to find me – amidst the Pissarro's and Monet's and Renoir's. While I was there I found myself before a painting by Vincent Van Gogh entitled, *A Wheatfield with Cypresses*. Like many of Van Gogh's works, it is a painting that seizes you with colors, shapes and figures. The mountains roll, the skies swirl, the cypresses sway and the wheat stalks glisten. This isn't just a wheat field and those aren't just cypresses and clouds and hills --- they are a creation come alive. It's hard to look at a Van Gogh and not feel the vibrancy of life. *The Starry Night* is another example of a common scene of a common town – but it is the vision of the artist that points us to the brilliance of the world and the universe. The night sky swirls and explodes with light. Now the interesting thing about these paintings is that they were painted when Van Gogh was in an asylum. In fact, at least one of them was painted directly from the window of the asylum.

Though he was himself in a dark, dark place within, there was still something in his mind, his eye, his heart that was able to see a world even more beautiful than what we could see. The artist could see not just the world, but a world he, and perhaps you and I, have always wanted. A world even more beautiful than we could see.

Here is an image that may be familiar to you – the prophecy window in the south transept of our sanctuary. As you know the windows in our transepts and chancel trace the Biblical story from prophecy to nativity to baptism to the Lord’s Supper to Palm Sunday and the Cross to the Resurrection and finally to the Ascension. The Prophecy window is taken from our passage this morning, Isaiah 11, where the prophet dreams a vision of the world when Messiah comes: *the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.* Bible scholars call it the eschatological vision. Use that phrase at your next holiday party – What is your eschatological vision? That will stop them in their tracks. The eschatological vision is the dream for what the world will be like when Messiah come – the dream for what the world will be like when God comes to set it right. *They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea.* What a wonderful vision of hope. All of creation will come together and peace will reign. Edward Hicks, a 19<sup>th</sup> century clergyman and painter, was so struck by this vision that he created a rendition of it in a painting called *Peaceable Kingdom*. Hicks took the literal imagery of Isaiah and placed it on canvas – animals, children, serpents and the like all living in harmony together. You can even see the nursing child playing over the hole of the asp. He even added William Penn and his Pennsylvania colonists reaching agreement with the Native Americans. Hicks painted 64 versions of this scene, so struck he was with this great vision of the time when God would set the world right again. It’s the world that we would always want. A world more beautiful than what we could see.

So whether it is two 18<sup>th</sup> century painters or a 6<sup>th</sup> century BC prophet – the truth is there is a longing, isn’t there, in all of us – for a time when the world will somehow come together. That the day will come when Messiah will establish his peaceable kingdom and all of the hurt and struggle of the

world will somehow dissolve into a vision of peace and harmony. That all the slights and jabs and petty bickering and selfishness and terror and greed and cancer and typhoons will all somehow go away. We hold this longing, this hope for a world that we've always wanted. A world where God takes command and fills the universe with his presence and wolves and lambs and calves and lions and little children and serpents and Ohio State fans and Michigan fans all somehow come together. We long for this.

And we call this longing, this God longing – we call it hope. Paul says, “We boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character, and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us.

You see, for the visionaries of scripture – when they painted their hopes and dreamed their eschatological visions – this wasn't for them pie in the sky. This wasn't some delusional dream that somehow the world was going to come together like some Coca-Cola commercial. That if they said it and some artist painted it and maybe some musician even put music to it – that somehow it was all going to come to be. No, the visionaries of scripture looked into the future and they rested their hope in the God of creation. They rested their hope in the God who puts the stars into the sky and breathed life into human beings and called forth a people and rescued them from slavery and established a covenant and gave them a law and ushered them into a promised land and placed above them a king named David and promised them a Messiah. And even though the world can get pretty dark and even though the times may get pretty tough and even though history may feel like it is turning against you and even though you may find yourself in the darkness and even though the great tree of Jesse, David's father, appears cut down at the stump – there shall come forth from that stump a branch. A living stem. A green leaf – and there will come a day when the world will be put right again. The people who dwelt in darkness will see a great light – and those who dwelt in the land of deep darkness – on them will light shine.

You see you have to remember that Isaiah writes his words, paints his picture – when Israel was in its darkest hour. Being dragged off to exile. Captives in foreign land. Their city destroyed. All hope

gone. Better get used to it the cynics said. Better give up on this God you once believed in. Better get used to looking at the world as it appears to be – a pretty drab and hopeless place where you grab for whatever you can. No sense believing anything else, they said, because fairy tales don't come true.

It is the way the world is, you know. The broken world has its way of convincing us that it's no use hoping. It's no use banking on a better day. Like the bumper sticker I saw a few years ago, "You're born hungry, wet and naked and then things get worse."

It's why I like so much the story that Mark tells us about the father whose got this child who he can't quite get help for – this father whose son is uncontrollable and no one seems to be able to help – this father who is beginning to doubt if there is ever going to be a world different than the world that has his son suffering so. Is the picture going to be any different Jesus? Because I am beginning to doubt it. The darkness might be too dark. I'm starting to forget. I'm starting to lose hope. Lord, I believe, but help my unbelief!!! I see the world as it is – but I want to see the world as it should be. And in a measure of mercy – the Messiah gives the father a little light. Lays his hands on the boy and settles him down and shows him a glimpse of the world to come.

It's so easy to give into the doubt, isn't it? It's so easy to give into the unbelief. It's so easy to see the world as it is and not as it should be. You don't have to go far to hear it loud and clear that the idea of a God who creates, redeems and sustains our good planet and people – is just a pipe dream, a delusional fantasy. Richard Dawkins tells us of our *God Delusion*. Sam Harris explains how we've reached *The End of Faith*. The late Christopher Hitchens found it his obligation to inform us that *God is Not Great*. We may 'yearn', they say, for a higher answer – but none exists.

Really? Is that their answer? Is that what the world is all about? No light in the darkness? No freedom to our slavery? No journey to the promised land? No covenant with the creator? No hope for the future? Don't tell Nelson Mandela that! Don't tell Martin Luther King that! Don't tell Abraham Lincoln that!

So what is it then that stirs within us when gospel writers tell us that a star appeared in the east, and angels appeared to shepherds and wise men visited from the east and Joseph and Mary went from Nazareth to the city of David, Bethlehem and there they delivered their first born son and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn. What is it that stirs within us when we hear that story? When we look at nativity – don't we see what the prophet see – don't we see the world as we want it to be? Don't we see it all coming together? Peaceable kingdom. A virgin giving birth. A king laid in a trough. A stable instead of a stately palace. A child lying down with the lamb and the calf. The stars moving into place. Kings bowing before the King. It all seems to be coming together and God places his hands upon his broken creation and settles us down and gives us a glimpse of the world to come.

“On that day, the prophet says, “the root of Jesse shall come forth and stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.”

And why might the nations inquire of him? Why might the peoples of the earth be curious? Because this is, isn't it, what we always hoped God would be! Humble enough to be born below us? Majestic enough to be worshipped by kings? Vulnerable enough to lay upon the straw? Miraculous enough to be born of a virgin? Merciful enough to put himself at our mercy? Loving enough to take on our plight?

I want to believe Lord ... but help my unbelief. There's enough darkness in me, Lord, that makes me want to give up. There's enough doubt in me, Lord, that makes me want to see the world only as it is. There's enough hurt in me Lord, to make me want to cower and withdraw. But to see nativity – to see the One who holds the world in his hands, and at the same time is held himself in the arms of a peasant girl. It is what dreams and visions are made of. Peaceable kingdom. Cries of a Messiah under a starry, starry night.

