Sermon: “Peace in the Valley”  Isaiah 65:17-25  
[Play “Peace in the Valley” sung by Elvis Presley, 195?]

This famous gospel song was written by the renown black gospel composer, Thomas A. Dorsey in 1937 for Mahalia Jackson. You think about the time and place, and you picture it being heard in African-American churches and homes in the late Great Depression, when times were tough economically as well, as in terms of social justice and equality. The song would go on to be a major hit on country/western charts and with Elvis on pop charts in the 1950’s. I remember it best because of a recording my mother loved by Tennessee Ernie Ford. (You can find it on You-Tube and other internet sites.)

The words of this song came into my head as I kept re-reading today’s text from the prophet Isaiah. Dorsey writes as a Christian composer, but he is definitely thinking of a similar image as that of Isaiah, of a time when sadness and sorrow will be no more, when lion shall lay down with the lamb, the Peaceable Kingdom of God, foreseen by Isaiah in chapter 11 as well as today’s reading. For Dorsey, this plays out as a future moment, perhaps after death, when there will be personal “peace” in the valley where one struggles now, perhaps a reference to that famous Valley of Death of the 23rd Psalm. As he writes in his chorus,

“There will be peace in the valley for me, some day.  
There will be peace in the valley for me, oh Lord I pray
There'll be no sadness, no sorrow, oh my Lordy, no trouble, trouble I see
There will be peace in the valley for me, for me.”

I think part of my recall of that song, associated with memory of my mother, is that it is intended to be a gospel message of comfort in a time of personal trouble and struggle, or sadness and sorrow. That message in song obviously communicates across time – from the Great Depression to 2010 – from oppressed poor but faithful African-Americans to impoverished or otherwise struggling white Americans, especially the rural cultures that so many of us, or our parents, came from.

Isaiah 65 is most likely from a later writer than the one in chapter 11. By the time chapter 65 is written the Israelites are returning home from their slavery and oppression to rebuild their country and Jerusalem, the central point of Judean worship and culture. By chapter 65, it is the 5th century BCE, the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, and the people are trying to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, if not the Temple. The Temple had been the holy of holies, it was where God resided or could best be experienced and praised and offerings received. But now the author sees a vision from God that is broader. The sacred area is much larger than the temple site. The vision is much broader in terms of people too, it is to encompass all who would worship, the One Lord and be taught God’s Word.

The author sees a vision so altered from his present reality that it is as if God, the great I am, “is about to create new heavens and a new earth.” This echoes the earlier Isaiah 11, but takes it a step further. Now God is not just saving a “righteous remnant” but is transforming the cosmos, which of course God created to begin with. We hear the themes of long abundant life, of building homes, planting family roots, planting vineyards (a multi-season crop) and eating your own grown fruit, no doubt as good wine. People will “enjoy the work of their hands.” They “shall not labor in vain,” an oft-quoted phrase, even today. And children, that most valued of produced fruit, will not die in childbirth, something most common until recent generations in our culture, and still all too common in much of the world. Offspring shall be blessed by the Lord – and their descendants as well. This is no small vision. This prophet sees big. It will be as if Eden is all new and we are starting all over, except this
time the serpent will be no problem. Temptation to sin will no longer exist. We will find ourselves close to God.

This is a heavenly vision, but it’s heaven on earth – the Kingdom of God realized. Or as the old preachers used to say, “It’s Friday, but Sunday’s coming!”

We all want “peace in our valley.” It may be the hope that keeps us coming back week after week to God to places of worship of the Holy One, such as this place.

In a reading from Luke 21:5-19, which I did not have us today, Jesus says, in his time, you disciples of mine see this beautiful temple, then the one built by King Herod and the Roman enforcement, you see “how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts” to God. “Not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.” And it was in 70 A.D. by the Romans, and still today is not rebuilt, though there is a magnificent mosque on its temple mount. And a wall below the hillside, you can go pray at in Jewish style and reverence, the so-called Wailing Wall.

Jesus went on in Luke 21 to forewarn, the disciples that you will suffer all types of persecution in Christ’s name, but in Luke 21:19 “by your endurance you will gain your souls.”

I suppose that is where I am at on my best days. I find myself enduring what little suffering I have, mostly mental, knowing that a new heaven and a new earth is promised by our God.

For now, sometimes all you and I can do is to remind ourselves of the heavenly vision of a restored creation where there will be no destruction, no hurt, no violence, no war, no death. We long for peace in our valley. We long to be changed from the creatures we are. And that is possible, my friends. We can be changed in an instant, through hope and faith in Jesus Christ.

There is a popular quote, “tough times never last, but tough people do.” Dr. Robert H. Schuller preached that, and he should know, especially now. I think my spin on that is that people of faith last, they endure hardship as it turns miraculously to blessing, with God’s help.

There will come a day, the Day of the Lord, when no more weeping shall be heard, when no more cries of distress will occur. Until that day, I thank God for this day, for the abundant blessings I have, for you my sisters and brothers in Christ, and I pledge to give to God whatever it takes to make some portion of God’s Kingdom more evident here where I am, on earth as it is in heaven. Until that day. Alleluia! Amen.