

“Envisioning the Fine Print”

Isaiah 12; Isaiah 65:17-25 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that your vision for our lives might permeate into every aspect of our living. In Jesus' name, Amen.

How concerned would you be if you died and got to heaven and discovered that God is a lawyer? Certainly, there are people who relate to God as if the Divine Presence is up in the sky, just waiting for a chance to trip us on a technicality. It seems like an awful way to live, no offense to honorable lawyers who use their powers for good. Thankfully, chances are high that God is not, in fact, a lawyer, but there is a reason I asked.

You hear me talk a lot about metaphor and what a powerful tool it is for understanding and deepening our faith. And our scripture lessons today are full of metaphors. Drawing water with joy from the wells of salvation is lovely one. The wolf and the lamb feeding together is another, one that is clearly human in origin, because it doesn't seem like either a wolf nor a lamb would consider it all that helpful. But what struck me in today's reading was not the beauty of the metaphors, but rather the portions of the passage from Isaiah 65 that read almost like a contract. “They shall build houses and inhabit them,” it says. And then, just to be sure it's clear and free of loopholes: “They shall not build and another inhabit.” As with shelter, so with food and drink: “they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit... they shall not plant

and another eat.” The very next line is a classic simile – “for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be” – but for a moment there, God is taking a very specific interest in the workings of the economy and clarifying the fine print in ways that cannot be ignored.

Now as we’ve been reminded all fall in our Bible study on the Minor Prophets, most of the prophetic writings in the Hebrew scriptures have exile as their backdrop. So this promise of getting to live in the house you built and getting to enjoy the work of your own hands in your own vineyard is very much an indictment of the exploitation inherent in being a people in exile. No longer will an occupying power or the nation that has taken you captive into a strange land demand that your labor benefit them instead of you. No longer will you work yourself into an early grave all the while remaining unable to safely house your children. When specific economic arrangements are the problem, only specific economic solutions will provide salvation.

Our relationship to language is so complex. Most of the time in our modern life, we prefer to skip the fine print – clicking on “I have read and agree to the service agreement” without even glancing at it. “The devil is in the details,” we say. And yet, our faith proclaims that it’s the Word that became flesh, and here we have just a glimpse of how God is present in the fine print of our lives. If we give thanks that God knows us fully and loves us deeply, we must understand that God holds perfect awareness of the intimate details of our lives. Even that phrase itself, “intimate details,” shows us what it means to be loved. The ones who are closest to us are the

ones who have read the fine print of our lives. They've taken the time, even when it got tedious or confusing, to understand the nuances of who we are and why we do the things we do. That's how it is with God; that's what it is to be fully known.

And this is also how God's vision, God's deepest desires for our world work. It's not a vague wish that things will shake out so that good outnumbers bad. It's justice and righteousness on every level, seeping into every nook and cranny, to set right every broken strand of the web of life. God's shalom is not a superficial, bird's-eye view of peace. It is both the beautiful sunset and the cosmic balance within every molecule. The picture on the screens here is the work of John August Swanson, which you've seen before in worship. One of the things I love about it is that you can tell the artist spent hours lovingly attending to every detail. Those stars were not painted by splashing paint across a canvas; each one is created with meticulous care to become its own vital part of the whole.

So much of scripture is that same idea made manifest in words, in the demands of the prophets for justice and the stories of Jesus' encounters with each individual he meets, bringing them salvation in the precise way each of them needs it. The details matter. We feel this, I think, when we pray together. We know and trust that God is aware of each situation we're lifting up. And yet, to speak the names of our friends and family in prayer, to describe the particular nature of the illness or fear that needs healing, helps us feel the power of God working in the intimate details of our lives. That is Christ in our midst, the Word made flesh.

Is God a lawyer? Is God an artist? Is God an author or poet? Sure! Is the power of the Word in our midst made real both through the impact of the beauty of our words and the specificity with which we pile them together? Yes! Words are commitments, reminding us of what we're living for. Words are hopes, making visions for the future more real by speaking them aloud. Words are boundaries, clarifying where the path of justice lies. They can reveal us, restore us, and revive us. Words can be the wells of salvation. Salvation can come to us through a contract just as likely as a poem. Certain problems need the power of the fine print. God's vision for our flourishing covers all the details. Of our shared life, and yes, of your life. God's desires for your life are not the vague platitudes your high school acquaintances wrote in your yearbook. God's words want to be spoken into each and every decision and moment and mood you go through. Those words of hope and love and generosity and grace want to permeate every level of your heart and your mind. They will cry out in tones of anguished indignation when you're exploited or in tones of loving but firm exhortation if you're doing the exploiting. And sometimes we struggle to figure out exactly what it is that's going wrong, and God sends the Holy Spirit, an Advocate, to work through that fine print with us and find the clause that explains where things went wrong. Can you imagine that God loves you enough to read the fine print of your life? Can you imagine that God is calling us to care enough about one another and our world to set right all the violations of those precious details? This is how the Word is made flesh in our midst. Hallelujah and Amen!