

“All Shall Be Well” – Kent Dunnington

Isaiah 65:17-25

As I’m sure you are all aware, the new Harry Potter movie will be coming out this Friday. Now I am not a fan of Harry Potter, but before you start throwing hymnals at me let me say that I am not a critic of Harry Potter either. In fact, I acknowledge that my lack of interest in Harry Potter is an indication of my deficiency as a human being. I really wish I loved Harry Potter. At least I can say that I love many people who love Harry Potter.

Some of my favorite fans of Harry Potter are the members of the Huston family. Ruth, Richard, and Peter have read all seven of the Harry Potter books, to one another, out loud, as a family. Richard recently told me about their last trip to Israel. As providence would have it, their trip was scheduled immediately on the heels of a Harry Potter book release, so they brought the book along to read in their spare time. What they found, however, was that Harry Potter had the magical power of creating extra spare time. Exploring the land of our Lord and Savior just seemed less urgent what with Harry Potter beckoning them back to their hotel. They read the whole book in their room in Jerusalem.

This is a funny story, but at first glance it might also seem a bit ridiculous. After all, what could be more urgent, more significant, more real than seeing Jerusalem! And what could be more insignificant, more fantastical, more unreal than reading Harry Potter! How can you shrug off the Temple Mount in favor of Hogwarts? Yet I think there is something profoundly important about the human love affair with fantasy literature. For fantasy literature (at least good fantasy literature) trains us to question our presumptions about what is real. And thus it is unsurprising that so much of the world’s best fantasy literature has been written by Christians, because in fact the Christian story is one long exercise in challenging and reorienting our sense of what is real.

As someone who works in a college environment, I tire of hearing certain sorts of claim about what is real. Some of you students will recognize this one: “Well, when you graduate and get out in the real world...” Presumably college life is unreal in comparison to something called the real world, which begins after you graduate. It is rarely specified why this is so, but I take it that people think being in college is not quite the real world since you don’t have to make mortgage payments and pay taxes and punch a time clock. You just spend your time thinking and reading and socializing. Of course, this is just patronizing to many college students who, in addition to studying, also work jobs, care for family members, deal with physical or mental illnesses, and experience the grief of broken and strained relationships. But even if we grant that college is basically about thinking and making friends, why should that be considered less real than

paying taxes and working eight to five? Does pursuing a paycheck participate more fully in reality than pursuing truth and friendship? Well, it all depends on what's real.

The calling of the Old Testament prophets was to tell the people of God what is real, and this is what we see Isaiah doing in our Old Testament reading for today. The last several chapters of Isaiah were written to the remnant of Israel who had returned to Jerusalem after their devastating captivity in Babylon. They had returned with much anticipation and hope; finally, the promises of God were to be fulfilled. They had been chastened by their exile, and they believed that finally they were prepared to be God's holy people through whom the covenant would be fulfilled.

To understand the significance of today's passage, we need to recognize exactly how the people of Israel thought this would go. Basically, Israel believed that the connection between covenant promise and covenant fulfillment was direct and historical. In other words, they believed that the new Jerusalem would be brought to fruition directly through the faithfulness of God's covenant people. If they could just worship God rightly, if they could just keep Torah consistently, if they could just be faithful enough, then—walla!—God would restore Jerusalem and the Temple and all of God's people would live long in comfort, fruitfulness, and security. And the returning exiles thought that they had what it took; they thought that they had learned their lessons.

But it just wasn't working out. The remnant had returned to Jerusalem, they had recommitted themselves to the practice of Torah under Ezra, they had rebuilt the walls under Nehemiah, they were even attempting to rebuild the Temple! And yet...things were not going well. They had dreamt of a glorious exodus from Babylon, complete with economic prosperity, freedom from outside oppressors, and harmony and right worship within Israel. But Israel's borders had swiftly been reduced to a measly square mile, they continued to be oppressed from all sides, the pagan religious rituals and cults had once again infected God's people, and daily life was harsh. God, where are you? Not this again!

Israel was exhausted and disheartened. And they were beginning to doubt God. They were tired of striving for the new Jerusalem, for it did not seem to be getting them anywhere. But in the midst of this despair, Isaiah receives a new word from Yahweh. "Behold, I am creating a new heaven and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind" (Isa 65:17).

This is indeed an altogether new word in Israel. It is the introduction into the story of Israel of something that theologians call "apocalyptic." Apocalyptic is the revelation that the future of God's people is not simply a development of history proceeding on its linear path but rather the result of a dramatic change, a massive intervention of God through which things get set right. "I am creating something new," says Yahweh, recalling the words from Genesis 1 that every Israelite would have known by heart. Israel's future is no longer to be conceived primarily as the unfolding of history, like a seed which already contains within itself its own future. Rather,

Israel's future is to be conceived as the invasion of history by a force who comes to rescue, liberate, and restore.

Moreover, Isaiah 65 brings a new word to God's people because it is not just about Israel. It is about the whole world. The entire cosmos will be utterly transformed, from the heights of the heavens to the depths of the earth. God is creating a new Jerusalem, true, but the re-creation of Jerusalem is part of the re-creation of the whole world. Even the wolves and lambs will be reconciled, and lions will become vegetarian.

So in this new prophetic vision, God has transformed Israel's view of what is real. The present age is not unreal, but neither is it the full disclosure of reality. Rather, the present age is prologue, anticipation, a sort of sneak preview of God's redemption of the world. The covenant community is not unreal, but neither is it the full disclosure of reality. Rather, the covenant community is simply those who are now in on the secret, those who know what everyone else is waiting for, those who are gifted with the revelation of "the real world."

Isaiah 65 is not the fullest disclosure of what is real; for that, we have to wait till Revelation 21, on the other side of resurrection. But if you read Revelation 21, you will see that the basic trajectory has been set by this apocalyptic vision of reality. Resurrection is, in fact, simply the Christian way of speaking apocalyptically, for resurrection means new creation. Echoing the words of Isaiah 65, the apostle Paul tells us that our future is resurrection. "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new" (2 Cor 5:17).

To speak of resurrection is to transform our understanding of what is most real. On the one hand, the language of resurrection means that we are not responsible for making the history of the world come out right. This was the burden that weighed heavily upon God's faithful people striving to make things work out right as they were rebuilding Jerusalem upon their return from exile. They thought they were responsible for bringing about their own good future. And Yahweh says "No!" I (not you) am creating a new heaven and a new earth.

On the other hand, the language of resurrection means that history and the created order matter. For resurrection means that the created order will not be abandoned in some escape of the immortal soul into an immaterial timelessness, as the Greek philosophers had taught. Rather, resurrection names the redemption, the restoration, and the rescue of history and creation. Behold, I am creating a new heaven and a new earth. Thus, although we need not strive for our redemption, neither may we be passive and idle, as Paul warns in our epistle reading for today. Rather, the revelation of God's assured redemption gives us the vision needed to live within the present age as a sign of what is to come, prefiguring in our work and our worship the redemption for which we wait.

In our gospel reading for today, Jesus tells us precisely what our lives are to look like as we watch and wait for cosmic redemption. The disciples, like us, were most interested in when the

wait would be over. “They asked him, ‘Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place’” (Lk 21:7). But Jesus refused to provide an answer. Do not concern yourselves with end-times speculation, he demands—a word that we need to hear again today amidst the evangelical obsession with books like Left Behind and movies like 2012. Rather, Jesus says, this time “will give you an opportunity to testify” (Lk 21:13). And, “by your endurance you will gain your souls” (Lk 21:19).

Testify and endure: that is our calling in this time between the times. Indeed, our endurance is very often our most powerful testimony. For although we are assured of the reality of resurrection, Jesus warns us that we will confront trials and tribulations as the old age fights and claws to impose upon us its own vision of what is real. Endure, Jesus says, for by your endurance you testify to what is real.

Endurance is not a very sexy virtue. Aristotle says that enduring is better than losing, but it is not nearly as good as conquering. Yet Jesus says that as Christians our calling is to endure. I am convinced that endurance and the correlative virtue of patience are constitutive of Christian faithfulness. For endurance, by its very nature, embodies and testifies to our conviction that we shall overcome, not because of our own might, but because our help comes from the Lord.

I remember when it first became clear to me that endurance was the Christian calling. I was in graduate school, in the midst of a depression brought on by a great deal of physical suffering and a deep spiritual malaise. In the midst of casting about for some response and finding nothing that I could do, I received an email from my grandfather. He told me that he had been feeling especially burdened for me, and he wanted to pass along to me a poem that had helped him during a time of intense tribulation. The poem was from a Filipino missionary. It consisted of four lines, each of which repeated again the refrain, “Go on, go on, go on, go on...”

I don’t think it is going to win the Pulitzer for poetry, but if you place those lines alongside several from Julian of Norwich, you have the call to discipleship in a nutshell.

Go on, go on, go on, go on,
Go on, go on, go on, go on,
For all shall be well,
And all shall be well,
And all manner of things shall be well.
Amen.