

As a family one of things we enjoy doing is having a movie night – and our boys are now at an age where we are able to choose movies we all enjoy.

Which is great because I'll never get those hours back having to watch sponge bob square pants or chipmunks the movie.

One of the shared genres of films that we all enjoy are those that envision the future – so we have been talking with our sons

about dystopian compared with utopian futures.

We have probably all seen such films right – the dystopian future where by way of a climate catastrophe, epidemic, nuclear winter – the future looks bleak.

Then there are the films that envision a utopian future – a trust that through technological and medical advancements coupled with human social evolution and progression we are in for a bright future.

These two very different pictures of the future are rooted in two very different pictures of human nature – one that human nature is fundamentally broken and will eventually lead to the unravelling of our world – the other that we are progressing, evolving to something better and brighter.

Over the season of advent we have been looking at the promises of God that are fulfilled in the coming King – the anointed one – Messiah – who we believe comes to

us at Christmas in the person of Jesus – and the final promise in our series is Isaiah 35 – I'll invite you to turn there in your bulletin.

Now chapter 35 is a mirror image of chapter 34 – so we must see them together - and like those dystopian and utopian films - each pictures a very different future.

You see as we have said the first 39 chapters of Isaiah are predominately

words of judgment – where God has called out his people on their oppression of the poor – their sexual immorality – their dishonouring of marriage - their greed – their racial injustice – and indicates that without repentance – without turning back to the way of justice and faithfulness – there will be defeat at the hands of the Babylonians and exile from the promised land.

But the people reject Isaiah’s vision of a holy God whose nature burns against sin –

they don’t trust the God who calls them to repentance – instead they make an alliance with Egypt – nothing will happen to us as long as we align ourselves with them – in other words – we’ve got this – we can protect ourselves – we can save ourselves – we control our own destiny.

And for seven chapters culminating in chapter 34 Isaiah reflects on where trust in such realities will leave us.

It will leave us – yes - under God’s judgment – but as Romans 1 reminds us the final expression of God’s judgement is that he removes his hand and gives us over to our own desires – our own devices – a future of our own making.

The images of Isaiah 34 are very visceral – very material – painting a picture of the unravelling of every aspect of life.

The images Isaiah paints are incredibly contemporary – polluted rivers – barren soil – skies darkened with burning oil.

The images reminded me a special exhibit at the AGO earlier this year – it was the work of photographer Edward Burtynsky entitled anthropocene – Laurie and I went to see it – the exhibit artistically portrayed the impact of human activity on our world – consumption run amuck - land ravaged by palm oil plantations – phosphorus tailings in florida – run off from lithium

mines for electronics – the blight of the oil sands – the burning of tons of ivory tusks seized from poachers.

These images of chapter 34 say to us that if God doesn't intervene and save us from ourselves – this is the final chapter – it is profoundly dystopian – profoundly pessimistic in its view of human nature.

In her incredible essay Creed or Chaos Dorothy Sayers reflects on this pessimism – and calls it one of the greatest sources of

strength in Christianity – she lived at a time as now where there was a strong belief in our being the product of evolution – and as a result there was this optimistic belief in the civilizing influence of progress and enlightenment – that we will save ourselves – that we will improve ourselves – that we have within us solutions to all the worlds problems

And then came a century where they witnessed the bestial ferocity of Totalitarian States – the obstinate

selfishness and stupid greed of Capitalist society – what they witnessed was the utter negation of a worldview that said through scientific knowledge and unconscious evolution we would perfect ourselves – At bottom – sayers concludes – this view is actually far more pessimistic than Christian pessimism because if science and progress break down there is nothing to fall back upon.

She ends by quoting the historian David Cecil who said – Christianity has compelled

the human mind not because it is the most cheering view of human existence but because it is truest to the facts – Isaiah 34 echoes this reality – human nature left to it's own devices will undo – will unravel -

But Isaiah 35 – our text - is a mirror image of chapter 34 – here is the future born of a trust in God – and as we heard it read for us - it is equally visceral –equally material.

It's images picture all of creation
responding with joy and delight at the
coming of the living God – the coming of
the messianic King – as the sun rises and
the plants straighten their stems and the
flowers blossom – the glory of his coming
will transform physical creation – the dry
desert will be shot through with life – the
sand will be crisscrossed with flowing
streams – the Sahara will take on the
fertility of Lebanon – the beauty of Carmel
– the orderliness of Sharon – could we not
add – clearcuts will become teeming

forests – land poisoned by industrial waste
fertile – plastic clogged seas clean and
clear

The glory of the Lord's revealing will also
mean vs. 5 the reintegration of our own
disintegrating reality – the blind will see –
the deaf will hear – the lame will leap like
deer.

This past week our community grieved the
death of Israel Newell – who had called
Little Trinity his spiritual home for some 46

years – a course of treatment for arthritis in his youth had left him physically frail, his growth arrested – his body twisted - bound to a wheelchair. An accident a year and half ago accelerated declining health and last week it became clear that he was in his final days. I went to visit him in hospital and as I prayed for him this imagery Isaiah 35 – I think by the Spirit’s prompting came to the forefront of my mind – and I said something like – Israel I yearn to see you in glory – for when you

see him face to face you will be transformed – and leap and dance for joy.

To be honest as I left I felt awkward having said it – I thought - that was a dumb thing to say to a man facing his death.

Earlier this week I was planning the funeral service with the family – and we were choosing scripture readings – and Lenore – Israel’s wife asked – what’s that passage about the lame man leaping for

joy – I smiled – Isaiah 35 – the text I’m preaching on on Sunday. She opened Israel’s bible that she had brought with her – it was mess born of overuse – the pages falling out – the binding broken - held together with elastics – and turning to Isaiah 35 it was underlined and highlighted symbols and notes everywhere – it was a text that Israel clearly had spent much time with – it seemed that it had animated his hope – his yearning – when the glory of the Lord is revealed – the lame man will leap like a deer.

When you consider your own material disintegration – whether that be physical or mental – what animates your hope – for when we see his glory – when we see him face to face you will be renewed and restored – anxiety will give way to peace – depression will give way to joy – infirmities will be removed – brokenness will be healed – tears will be wiped away – all that has been lost will be restored.

One of our most beloved Christmas Carols speaks to this wholistic all encompassing material reality to our hope at his coming...

No more let sin and sorrow grow

Nor thorns infest the ground:

He comes to make his blessings flow

Far as the curse is found,

Far as the curse is found,

Isaiah puts two pictures in front of us –

Isaiah 34 – believe we are our own masters our own saviors our own protectors – will lead to the utter unraveling of every aspect of life

Isaiah 35 – trust in God will lead to the utter renewal, restoration, and recreation of every aspect of life.

The two pictures lay a choice in front of us – which future will we choose? Is it even a choice?

But how – how do we grab a hold of the future revealed in Isaiah 35?

Well vs. 8 - Isaiah says there's a highway there – and who travels on that highway – vs. 9 the redeemed – the redeemed travel there.

It's a very specific word – and this is the first time it appears in the book of Isaiah – and it references a reality well known to Isaiah's listeners but rather foreign to us.

You see in the ancient world there was no bankruptcy laws – so if you owed creditors more than you could pay them – you would first lose your land – become a tenant farmer – then you would subsequently lose your freedom - you and your family would become enslaved to your creditor until the debt was paid.

But you could get into that kind of situation for all sorts of reasons right – famine – illness – family tragedy – financial missteps – the reality was that

this was going to happen and so within society there needed to be a way to allow people to get out of such circumstances – so there was this law – the law of the kinsman redeemer – you could be rescued from slavery – you could be rescued from financial ruin – brought to freedom by a kinsman redeemer - and to be a kinsman redeemer you had to fulfill three characteristics.

First - you had to be a relative – flesh and blood – and they couldn't rescue you by

compulsion – it had to be done in love – freely – voluntarily – and they had to bring about your liberation by absorbing your debt – absorbing the cost themselves.

This is the lens that Isaiah is giving us as we consider Christmas. At Christmas God becomes our kinsman redeemer – God takes on flesh – he becomes one of us in Jesus – and he responds to our distress our brokenness the unravelling of every aspect of life freely voluntarily lovingly – by taking on our sins – our sorrows – our

griefs – our infirmities to the cross – and his rising again ushers in an entirely new future – his resurrection the inauguration of this new creation of Isaiah 35.

How does Isaiah 35 become our future?

By receiving Jesus as our kinsman redeemer.

But what now? How then do we live in light of that future?

Well the modern church often falls into two equal and opposite errors when it comes to this

One wing of the church sees the future as heaven – detached from the earth – so the aim becomes primarily conversion – we have to get as many people as possible to be a part of that future – so let's get about the business of evangelism – and just sit back and then wait for that future – no interest in improving the lot of humanity or addressing the state of the physical

universe – why wallpaper the house if it's going to be knocked down – why worry about your carbon footprint if Jesus is going to destroy it all and make it afresh.

The other extreme – the other error in the church – sees God's work in and through human social evolution and progression – and sees our movement slowly but surely to the perfect place that God has in mind – through our engagement with social and cultural improvement – care for the environment – so that God's kingdom will

come on earth through our activity – but that ignores the reality of Isaiah 34 – his kingdom will not be our doing – it will be the free gift of God – a massive act of grace and new creation.

So if these two options completely miss the point – how then shall we live?

We spoke a little about this this past Easter – where I mentioned Martin Luther – who was once asked – if Jesus is going to return tomorrow to establish his earthly

kingdom – what would you do today?- He responded – I would plant a tree.

What – you'd plant a tree? What would be the point? – if everything is going to be over tomorrow – if Jesus is coming to start all over again – if our future is spiritual – some heavenly ethereal existence – why would you plant a tree? - well Luther was rooted in Isaiah 35- the future is not spiritual it is physical – the future is not some heavenly existence – it is an earthly existence – Jesus is not returning to

destroy physical reality – he is coming to renew physical reality.

Luther plants a tree because he longs to see what Jesus will do with that tree when he returns – for that tree will grow – that tree will blossom – that tree will flourish – that tree - will sing for joy when the Lord comes – it will live into the fullness of what it was created for.

In a reflection on this reality – the Anglican theologian N.T. Wright writes in a

blog - I don't know what musical instruments we will have to play Bach, though I'm sure Bach's music will be there. I don't know how my work for justice for the poor, for remission of global debts, will reappear in that new world. But I know that God's new world of justice and joy, of hope for the whole earth, was launched when Jesus came out of the tomb - I know he calls me and you to live in him and by the power of his spirit, to be new-creation people here and now, giving birth to signs and symbols of God's renewed creation

even in the midst of the present age – that is how we live in light of this future – by the power of the spirit bringing forth signs and symbols of this new creation.

When I was 15 I was working at a Christian camp and was placed in a cabin 9 and 10 year old boys – I was the most jr of counsellors with 2 others above me – due to some family emergencies both of them had to leave and I was left alone

with that entire cabin – not a clue what I was doing – and so I prayed and prayed.

One of the first duties was to lead a bible study – which had the unfortunate timing of being after lunch and before tuck time – when the junk food the boys had ordered in the morning would arrive – we began to study the bible – the boys were engaged in a way I couldn't have imagined – so much so that by the time tuck arrived they wanted to keep going and delay the junk

food – and so we went out to the field to keep going.

The time came to a close and one of the boys said – I think we should pray to ask Jesus to come into our lives – it was a brilliant idea and so we began to pray – as each boy in turn invited Jesus into their lives – at the end of the prayer we opened our eyes and Matthew the boy to my left opened his eyes and said – I can see – I can see – I hadn't a clue what he was talking about – what do you mean you can

see? – I can see I can see – you see that tree over there I can see every leaf on it – I was completely confused – when he was calmed down sufficiently to address our confusion he began to share the backstory – apparently when he was younger he was in the garage with his Dad working with a saw – and something flew off the saw and became lodged in his eye making his vision blurry – the moment he opened his eyes after the prayer his vision was restored.

The arrival of King Jesus into his life had given him and us a foretaste of his glorious future – he was a sign and a symbol of Jesus’ new creation.

How do we live in light of that future – by the power of his spirit we bring forth signs and symbols of that new creation.

We do that in our working toward his justice – we do that in our loving care for the poor the lonely the outcast – we do that in our evangelism as we introduce

people to Jesus the kinsman redeemer
who enables us to walk that highway – we
do that in our care of creation – we do that
in our physical and spiritual support of the
sick and broken – bringing forth signs and
symbols of that future kingdom that Jesus
will bring upon his return as a gift – a
massive act of grace and new creation.

In light of this glorious promise – may our
cry be – our prayer be – Maranatha -
Come Lord Jesus come. Amen