

*Isaiah 65:17–25**Luke 13: 31–35*

How long does it take to come to love a city?

I have friends, and maybe you do too, who say that the moment they stepped off the bus or emerged from the subway, the moment they first saw the skyline from the highway, they knew that that was where they were meant to be. And I know others who grow much more slowly into relationship with streets full of anonymity, unfamiliar corners, indifferent neighborhoods. The life of a city is always wider than anyone's reach – and sometimes it's hard to find a vantage point wide enough to comprehend its complexity, its vitality, to see it for what it is. So many lives unfolding in an infinite sequence of interlocking Venn diagrams: partially overlapping, carefully distinct, separate and yet together, impossible by definition and by design to fully take in. How do you come to love such a place?

I think it was the helicopter that did it for me.

For the first few weeks of my life here, last fall, looking out on Ann Arbor from the little slope on the north side of town where my house is, all I could see was shapes I didn't recognize, shoulders of buildings turned away from me, full of their own busyness, all part of a story I didn't know. Then, as the leaves began to come down and the evening view over the river opened up, the fortress of the university hospital with all its cold lights became a familiar shape. And then one night I connected the strange sound I'd been hearing for weeks with something I could finally make out through the branches: the med-evac helicopter coming and going from the landing pad at the base of that medical promontory. Sometimes several times a night it would embark, or return ... and it finally dawned on me that each occurrence of all that whipping up of the air, that flurry of blinking lights, was a marker on a night that some family would now always remember. Suddenly the city couldn't just be all shapes and abstractions and ideas any more: somebody's life had hung in that balance, and a handful of other lives had mustered themselves to help a vulnerable body find its way into the web of care, into the matrix of stories, the constellation of lights that weren't cold at all, but warm. It was as though the helicopter finally marked the entrance I hadn't been able to find, and suddenly there were lives, stories coming and going one at a time, being ferried through thin air into a real human embrace just a little too far away for the eye to pick out, but not too small for the heart to feel. The hopes and fears of all the years etched, day by day, flight by flight, like the filaments of a fingerprint, each line a story, each line part of the key to the humanity and identity of the whole city.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem... Here is Jesus contemplating the city, aching with its tribulation, longing for its healing, crying out for it to open its heart. Here is Jesus, loving the city in spite of everything he knows about it – stretching his reach almost wide enough to take it all in under the shelter of his capacious wings. Jerusalem, Jerusalem – how often have I longed to gather all your tender lives together, all that complexity, all that impossible, interlocking particularity – how often have I wished you safety, imagined the web of care that holds you even now? How often have I lamented your indifference, how often have I held your broken heart?

There's an interesting biblical wrinkle about this little moment in the story of Jesus. According to the gospel of Luke, Jesus is still up in Galilee (miles and miles north of Jerusalem) when he pauses for this moment of lamentation about the city that is the destination of his journey, still in-progress. We don't know for sure if he'd ever been to Jerusalem before – the gospels actually disagree about that.<sup>1</sup> But you can remember a place even if you've never been there, can't you, if it has printed itself on the soul of your people – maybe like the Statue of Liberty, or Ellis Island, the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis or the border wall near Tucson, places some of us may not have been, but all of us remember. Maybe you see them in your mind's eye, and maybe rejoice in what is beloved about them, or ache for what you know of the anguish that's engraved into them. In Luke, when Jesus pauses in his journey to contemplate the city that is his destination, to see it with that kind of memory, he is lamenting over something bigger than the skyline. He is holding the memory and the meaning of the city that was like the fingerprint of Israel upon the world – evidently (according to Luke) before he'd ever even seen it with his own eyes.

Five hundred years earlier, the prophet Isaiah was encouraging people to see their beloved city that same way. In the 6th century B.C.E., the exiles to whom Isaiah was speaking were returning to a city that had been decimated by a catastrophe of conquest and then a generation of dereliction and neglect. Isaiah was inviting them to come home from exile to a place they'd been seeing every day in hindsight. They knew it with their eyes closed. Now here it was – but they found it such a long way from both memory, looking back, and hope, looking ahead. And Isaiah was urging them to contemplate it with the eyes of faith. "I am about to create new heavens and a new earth," Isaiah said, on God's behalf. "The former things shall not be remembered," he said, trying to encourage them to let go of the despair and discouragement that had been engraved in them by the experience of a generation of captivity in Babylon. But I don't think Isaiah means that the "new thing" that God is doing begins with forgetfulness. I think he means that it begins with letting go of preconceptions of the future that are grounded, only, in past defeats and disappointments. I think it means being able to look toward the future in a way that is free of projections of the present conundrum of decay and despair.

Someone called hope a way of "remembering the future".

Hope is a way of looking ahead. It's a kind of remembering in which the whole of the future is greater than all its past parts. Cultivating that kind of memory of the future is an antidote to the despair that's sure we can only be as good as we have been. It's the antithesis of the cynicism that is certain that the vision of life together that we hold is unachievable.

Time and time again, when scripture invites us to remember the future, it frames the new thing that God is doing as a vision of a city. “Jerusalem” is a name for the place we remember while in exile, looking back. It was the word Jesus spoke, almost as a prayerful sigh, as he paused on the way to consider the failures of vision he saw around him in the lamentable social order of his day – epitomized, interestingly, by a “fox” of a ruler who couldn’t be trusted as a steward of any vision of a city you’d want to live in. But “Jerusalem” was also, always, a name for the place to which we hope we’re going. It holds both memory and hope. It’s the place where we really can, and will, all live side by side. The vision of wellness, wellbeing, well-doing, well-thinking that goes by that name – says Isaiah, says Jesus – is no dream. Next year in (a new) Jerusalem!!

Some of you may remember the epic play of the 1990’s *Angels in America* – written by Tony Kushner as a kind of defiant elegy in the midst of another viral crisis, the AIDS epidemic that was then decimating the cities of America. Among other things, that play is a kind of love song to some of those cities (at one moment, for instance, Kushner has one of his angels announce that “heaven is a city remarkably resembling San Francisco”) – which I guess is what made me think of the play this week while contemplating both Isaiah’s love and Jesus’s love for the city, and trying to imagine how to take to heart Isaiah’s confidence that God is in the process of “creat[ing] the city as a joy.” How can we remember the future of the city as our home and our destination, with its distress dismantled, its bruised and bewildered residents reassured that “they shall build houses and live in them, they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit; they shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; and no more shall there be an old person who does not live out a lifetime; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it”? How shall we remember that future? At the very end of *Angels in America* the main character, a young man named Prior who has been living with AIDS for five years, meets the audience at the Bethesda fountain in Central Park – a towering statue of an angel touching down to stir the waters of healing. So – here we are in the midst of another viral crisis – and here we are in the midst of another pandemic of discrimination that makes some people outcasts in a country that still says it’s proud of its creed of equality. Here we are, exiles of a sort in the midst of a decimated economy and a suddenly vulnerable democracy – when the place that we remember living is vivid in our memory, but the place that we long to live, the place that we know this place can be, is still a long way off. Here we are – and here is Prior speaking, at the end of *Angels in America*, directly to all of us, too: to the infected and the well, the bereaved and the consoled, the oppressed and the allies, the exiled and the returning, as he stands at the foot of the Bethesda fountain in the city that he laments and loves –

*This is my favorite place in New York City. No, in the whole universe. The parts of it I have seen.*

*This is the angel Bethesda... [This is] her story. She landed in the Temple square in Jerusalem, right in the middle of a working day she descended and just her foot touched earth. And where it did, a fountain shot up*

*from the ground. If anyone who was suffering, in the body or the spirit, walked through the waters of the fountain of Bethesda, they would be healed...*

*The fountain's not flowing now, they turn it off in the winter, ice in the pipes. But in the summer it's a sight to see. I want to be around to see it. I plan to be. I hope to be.*

*This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come.<sup>2</sup>*

Just before he turned from his contemplation back to the road that led to the city, Jesus said, "You will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

Dear friends, the time has come. Blessed is that one who has come to help us heal our view of the future – our remembering the future of the city where we all live together in the human race: re-created by love, re-formed by justice, re-imagined by hope. The world only spins forward. We will (all) be citizens together in the holy city. The time has come. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

### **The Reverend Dr. Richard E. Spalding, Interim Pastor**

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<sup>1</sup>Already in chapter 2 of the gospel of John, Jesus is in Jerusalem for Passover – though he doesn't take part in a Passover meal (with important differences from the other gospels' "Last Supper" narratives) until he apparently returns, 11:55ff. Meanwhile, the only other occurrence of Jesus' lament over Jerusalem is in Matthew 13:34ff.

<sup>2</sup>Tony Kushner, *Angels in America* – a Gay Fantasia on National Themes, Part Two: *Perestroika* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1992), pp. 146-148.