

**IN TIMES LIKE THESE**  
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November 17, 2013  
33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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**Isaiah 65:17-25**

*For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.*

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By now we have all seen the catastrophic destruction that befell the Philippines just 10 days ago. In times like these we crumble to our knees in horror—we crumble to our knees shocked and speechless before incomprehensible suffering.

That is not the world we want. It is, however, the world we got.

In case you've forgotten, we are borne into this world without our consent. And we are borne time and time again into places and situations we'd rather not be. Sometimes our whole world falls apart.

As most of you know, the world my family knew fell apart last year. We were borne into a world we didn't want. Heaven and earth collapsed and we were plunged into darkness and confusion.

We didn't know how things would or could turn out. As it turns out life is always created out of the ruins of another world.

And, as we found out, you can't do it alone. It takes many hands and many hearts to rebuild from the ruins. It takes a village. It takes a community of faith, hope and love.

Yes, the world is good and beautiful but it is also fierce, cruel and heartless. Hurricanes, monsoons, typhoons, tsunamis, tornados, cyclones and earthquakes destroy without mercy. Yet it's a simple ecological fact: *without those, this planet would be lifeless. Dead.*

What, then, shall we do? What, then, can we do in such a world?

We may never figure out how to prevent storms but we can and have figured out how to mitigate damage, up to a point. We can build dikes and levees. We can build stronger houses. We can train more first responders. And we can address climate change. We can mitigate damage even if we can't eliminate it.

And, then, there are some things we just simply learn to live with. It's a simple truth: *we are vulnerable and mortal.* Everything and everybody dies sooner or later. There is no absolute security on this planet. Risks abound everywhere. If there's a safer world, we've yet to find it. And, by the way, Disney World doesn't count.

Over the past 10 years we have seen catastrophic destruction in one form or another visited upon nearly every land from Haiti to India, from New Orleans to Japan and now the Philippines. In times like these we feel helpless and hopeless—but not for long. It doesn't take long for people to get up and get to work, to bring light and order out of chaos and darkness—not unlike the Creator in our mythic tale of creation portrayed in Genesis. Even there, in that mythic tale, creation arises out of ruins, out of darkness and chaos—not out of nothingness, whatever that is, or isn't!

We are the most creative of species evolution has yet borne into this world. No one knows the limits of our powers for good and evil. The story is still unfolding.

It's true: there's not much we can do for the Philippines from here today. But that doesn't mean we can't do something. In fact, we can and we will.

In just a few minutes from now, we will offer support, comfort and strength to our Filipino brothers and sisters in the form of money, which isn't everything but it is something in times like these. When you think about it, money is a form of stored energy—our work converted into currency that has power to do certain things—including compassionate things. Our offering of financial gifts will be channeled through Presbyterian Disaster Assistance to our partners in the Philippines.

In times like these it takes more than a village, it takes more than a dozen NGOs it takes more than a few nations. In times like these, it takes the world to lift up a people from such devastation.

Today our hearts are fixed on the Philippines—and rightfully so. But today my heart is also fixed on some of you whose lives have been flattened and wrecked by typhoons of another sort.

I've never stood in the wreckage of New Orleans, Haiti or Tacloban (Philippines). But I have stood with some of you in the wreckage of your lives.

I've stood with you after shocking news and devastating deaths. I've stood with you in deep grief, so deep it will not go away. I've stood with you in the wreckage of divorces. I've stood with you in the wreckage of broken down children, broken dreams and dark addictions.

In times like these it often feels like the end of the world. And in a way it is. That world is gone forever. But it isn't necessarily the end of everything.

It can be a new beginning. Creation arises out death and darkness time and time again. Out of the ruins. Not by magic but by works of love.

There is a promise long held in the human heart, a promise of a new world, a new heaven and earth—not elsewhere, but right here, right now. It's a promise so powerful we call it divine. We also call it compassion.

The prophet Isaiah heard it 600 years before Jesus after his people had been crushed and devastated. Ruined.

*I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.*

Let's pause there to consider this: If "Jerusalem," why not Tacloban, or Detroit, or large swaths of America where children die too soon, where the elderly are forsaken, where workers aren't paid fairly, where houses are foreclosed, where fields are confiscated by greedy corporation, where predators in various guises prowl, bully and destroy the innocent, like wolves devouring lambs. Some predators, by the way, can be social policies, practices, laws and even organizations and corporations. Predators who destroy the innocent like wolves.

*I am about to create new heavens and a new earth. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress.*

*No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime.*

*I am about to create new heavens and a new earth.*

*They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.*

*They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity.*

*The wolf and the lamb shall feed together! They shall not hurt or destroy again, says the LORD. I am about to create a new heaven and a new earth for you. (Isaiah 65:17-25)*

And that—in so many words—is the longing in our own hearts. A new world rebuilt on love and justice. It's a promise of new possibilities.

It's not magic. It's not the work of angels. It's the long hard work of compassion by ordinary people. It doesn't happen overnight or in two or three days. It could take years. But it does happen.

If your life is in ruins today, may it happen for you soon. And may it happen for our Filipino brothers and sisters soon, and very soon.

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#### **HYMN**

**"When Waters Roar and Foam"**