

## Rebuild the World

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February 23rd 2025, World Mission Sunday

Isaiah 61:1–4; Psalm 96; Romans 10:9–17; John 20:19–31

I read a little this week<sup>1</sup> about asteroid 2024 YR4 which made some headlines recently as the probability of it hitting Earth when it is projected to pass by in the year 2032 jumped up to 3.1%, the highest ever recorded for an object of its size. But not to worry, this is not a civilization-ending asteroid, although it would have devastating consequences were it to hit near a city. Measuring in at merely an estimated 130 to 300 feet, this asteroid, in the extremely unlikely event that it struck Earth, would still cause extreme devastation on a surprisingly large area. One article called this asteroid a “city killer.”<sup>2</sup>

I share this not to make you afraid. I am sure that with new data, that 3.1% chance of impact will shrink back down to zero. But I do want us to imagine today what it would be like for a city, a city that we love, to be destroyed by an outside, unstoppable, seemingly cosmic force. Because that is the sort of situation into which the prophet speaks in our reading from Isaiah this morning.

Think with me about what it must have been like to be an exile in Babylon, your ancestral home destroyed in Jerusalem. The place that had been your ancestors’

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2025/02/19/asteroid-yr4-hitting-earth-odds-2032-nasa/79167778007/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.livescience.com/space/asteroids/chance-of-city-killer-asteroid-2024-yr4-smashing-into-earth-rises-yet-again-to-3-1-percent-nasa-reports>

center of worship reduced to rubble. That is the perspective from which Isaiah 61 comes. For the people of Judah, the world ended when Babylon destroyed God's city and God's temple.

This passage has come up for us several times in the past few weeks. I think our attention is being drawn to this passage for good reason. There is a lot of richness here that makes it no surprise that Jesus chooses it to frame his own ministry in Luke 4. But I want to focus on a latter portion of these verses today, the verses that seem to speak directly to that dread of the world's end at the destroyed city, the destroyed temple.

Isaiah 61 begins with a declaration from the Lord's anointed one, who has received God's Spirit. Then, he proceeds to list the things that God has anointed him to do. After the portion that we are familiar with from Jesus' sermon, we have further tasks of the Lord's messenger. Hear what the one who claims to have the Spirit of the Lord says that same Spirit has told him to do:

to grant to those who mourn in Zion—

to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes,

the oil of gladness instead of mourning,

the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit;

that they may be called oaks of righteousness,

the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified.

They shall build up the ancient ruins;

they shall raise up the former devastations;

they shall repair the ruined cities,  
the devastations of many generations.<sup>3</sup>

This is the message of hope the prophet has for a people mourning over their beloved city. God is a God who rebuilds. His anointed one comes to do that very work. And of course, that would literally happen in Jerusalem in the days of Nehemiah – the rebuilding of the city. By the time of Jesus, a new temple had been around quite a while, and to some, the prophecy had been completely fulfilled. The ruined city was thriving again.

But Jesus knew that there was more rebuilding to do. The damage to God's people and to all people extended far beyond any singular city or set of physical structures, but to every human heart. Babylon wasn't the ultimate villain after all, sin was. The destruction was so much worse than previously thought. But so also was the remedy so much greater. And so when Jesus begins his ministry with Isaiah 61, one of the things he is saying is that he has come to begin a cosmic reconstruction project. He calls it the Kingdom of God.

And so as we gather today for World Mission Sunday, let our urgency to share the good news of Jesus be driven by a right vision of what it is we are called to participate in. In being called to share the good news of the gospel, in the words that we say and in the things that we do - because let's remember we don't have a half calling that deals in mere words or mere deeds...In being called to share the good news of the Gospel, we are being invited to help rebuild the ruins of the world.

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<sup>3</sup> Isa 61:3-4

And as we see from Isaiah, this brokenness is a communal reality felt in the disordered and unjust systems of the world. Sin has consequences writ large for societies. Think of those things which God's anointed one has come to cure. Poverty, brokenheartedness, captivity and imprisonment, mourning - these are all signs of a society that is sick.

I don't have to tell you that culture is broken. Your heads are already filled with all the headlines that scream this reality in deafening tones. We need healing. And not just the everybody-hold-hands-and-give-each-other-a-hug type of sentimental healing. We need what Martin Luther King called a "radical revolution of values."<sup>4</sup> We look around and sometimes it seems like all we see is destruction. And to this we hear those hopeful words of the prophet:

They shall build up the ancient ruins;  
they shall raise up the former devastations;  
they shall repair the ruined cities,  
the devastations of many generations.

But the destruction which the Gospel comes to rebuild is not just on the level of societies, structures, and systems. At the heart of the brokenness of the world is the brokenness that exists in each and every human heart. The interior space of every human person, through our own faults and decisions and those things others do to

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<sup>4</sup> MLK, *Beyond Vietnam*

us, are no less desolate than a destroyed city or a flattened temple. We need reconstruction.

Listen again how the Apostle Paul, a man who needed a fairly dramatic reconstruction of his own, describes the personal aspects of salvation in Christ:

“...because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, ‘Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him.”

Note all the personal language in that description of what Jesus does for us. He saves us. We are justified. We must believe in our hearts. We confess with our mouths.

In the same way I don't need to tell you that the world is broken, I don't need to tell you that it is filled with broken people. Evil is just as happy to ruin lives as much as communities. And so often it is individuals who bear the pain and darkness of sin, including their own. It is not merely the world that needs a savior, it's us. You do. I do. Your neighbor does.

I mentioned earlier that there are those who want to divide up the gospel and suggest to us that either our deeds or our words are secondary when sharing the love of Jesus with others. There is another false choice that seems to fall along the

same ideological lines. This is the idea that the destruction of sin is primarily a societal problem or a personal problem. The Bible doesn't let us make that distinction.

And the good news of the gospel is that God can fix the personal and the communal destruction wrought by human sin. The gospel is personal enough to call you from your wickedness and into right paths. It is also good enough and strong enough to fix the ways in which broken people have made a broken world.

The New Creation brought in by Jesus, the new order he told his disciples to proclaim and baptize people into from that Great Commission mountain top all the way to the ends of the world, it was demonstrated in his resurrected body which no longer was under the threat of death. That is what is on offer to every man, woman, and child in Jesus' name. You can't get more personal than that. I am reminded of the track from Drew Holcomb about the good news of Jesus - "I want you to live forever." That is what is at stake.

That new creation also includes much more than our personal salvation, but culminates in the heavenly city of Jerusalem coming down, uniting heaven and earth, an indestructible and incorruptible city. A just order that rights every structural wrong. A world re-constructed around the good, never to crumble again. That reconstructed temple that Isaiah dreamed for and the people saw in Jesus' day was indeed a sight to see, but it too would be laid to waste. Not so the Temple that was not made by human hands, the resurrected Christ who rules the cosmos from the right hand of the Father injecting resurrection into every corner of creation.

So what about us caught here in the middle? We just wait it out and hope for heaven to break in as soon as possible? Well, yes, but we don't do *just* that. Because there are little reclamation projects all around us, Gospel-shaped opportunities to which we have been called to put the world back together again, even as we await God to bring the fullness of that work to fruition.

And that work can be tiresome. When you are surrounded by rubble, it can begin to think like destruction is the only thing that exists. Sometimes we can be so used to sickness that we forget what health feels like. What do we do when it doesn't seem like anything we could do would make any difference in such a broken and shattered world?

I want you to remember this morning that God already has all that he needs to make things right. The ingredients are all there already. There is a little wordplay in Isaiah 61 that gets lost in the translation to English that I think merits reflecting on. It comes in verse three, where we hear that God's anointed one will give to God's people a beautiful headdress where they have had ashes.

What would have been obvious to Hebrew readers, but is not so to you and I, is that those words for headdress and ashes, are actually made up of the same Hebrew consonants, just in a different order.<sup>5</sup> You mix up the Hebrew word for ashes and you get the word for headdress. So the picture is that God can work with what is and

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<sup>5</sup> Alter, Robert. *The Hebrew Bible: The Prophets*, 827.

make it into something whole and beautiful. The ingredients are all there. God has everything he needs.

In so many ways, things seem out of order. The relationship that is giving you struggle. The financial concerns that are keeping you up at night. Your concern over the state and safety of the world. The people in your life that need the good news of Jesus. All of that might feel like a giant pile of ashes right now. Feeling may be understating it, that's what it is - ash, destruction. But even that is not a barrier for God's work of New Creation. The Gospel remakes ashes into beauty.

So if you want to rebuild a broken world, preach and share the gospel. Preach repentance and grace. Preach the love that makes New Creation possible. Use your words and use your hands.

Rebuilding is happening among neighbors close by and neighbors far away. It happens with friends who are learning English here on Monday nights, in food and little treats given to neighbors on Tuesday afternoons in our neighborhood. It happens overseas in the words of missionaries and in the aid offered by organizations we support. The reclamation project is underway and waiting for you to join in, maybe in such a small way as having that conversation with an unbelieving friend the Holy Spirit has been prompting you to have.

For us to be a people centered on the world-wide mission of the church, I think a change in perspective is necessary. And when we hear that phrase a change in perspective, the association we usually make is a negative one, - "here is how we



need to fix the wrong way we are looking at things.” But Charlie taught me something about a change in perspective this past week.

Charlie is really into Mars at the moment, not least of all because the team at the Mickey Mouse Clubhouse has a tendency to get themselves stuck up there. When Charlie was with his grandparents last weekend, he found a way to turn the whole world into Mars. He has a red magnatile, a type of building block that you can see through and is big enough to cover his whole face. When he looks through that tile, everything he sees is red. Suddenly what was once the world can be re-imagined as Mars. What was once far away and theoretical, has become for him immediate and tangible. All that was needed was an addition to his perspective.

If we let it, the mission of proclaiming God’s good news to the ends of the Earth is the type of filter that can change the way we see everything, every person, every circumstance. We will start to see the potential for renewal in the midst of destruction, the hope for beauty remade from ashes. So my encouragement to you this week, this year, is to look for those little reconstruction projects that a Gospel type of vision reveals. Look for those little destroyed corners of your world that need the rebuilding efforts of the Gospel. Because our God is a God of repair and renewal. He is eager for you to join him in his work.

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