The Revised Common lectionary is a prescribed set of Scripture readings for all the Sundays of the year. There are four readings for each Sunday – an Old Testament lesson, a Psalm, a passage from one of the Gospels, and another from one of the letters in the back of the Bible. Some of you have noticed that sometimes we follow it. Sometimes we don’t. When I read the Old Testament text assigned for this Sunday from Isaiah 65, I started to weep. It felt to me like a gift to us from God. I long for you to hear the hope God intends for us this day.

A little context here: Several hundred years before Isaiah wrote the poetry we are reading this morning, Jerusalem had been brutally conquered by the Babylonians. The city had been destroyed and the people were carted off into exile in Babylon. Now, however, they are finally free from their captivity. They had traveled back home to Jerusalem. As they survey the damage in this land that is strange to them, they feel very uncertain about their future. Isaiah enters with a vision from God to comfort them, to guide them. It’s a vision they are invited to help build.

This passage is often called “The Peaceable Kingdom.” On the cover of your bulletin is one artist’s rendering of that vision. Early American artist Edward Hicks was so taken with this vision that he made 62 versions of his painting. The Peaceable Kingdom formed his imagination and found expression in his faith through his whole life.

One of the wonderful things about Isaiah’s vision of a new heaven and new earth is that it isn’t otherworldly. It’s about heaven coming on earth. It’s about a world that is healed, where children grow up, and adults grow old, and animals coexist. Isaiah is a poet and the whole section of the Bible that surrounds Isaiah 65 is so exquisitely expressed, I wanted more of it for us on this day. So we have two readings, from Isaiah 58 and Isaiah 65.
Isaiah 58:9-12
Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

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. 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. 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; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD—and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.
Our kids phoned us on Tuesday night. Sam and Nicki are both away at college at schools in the east. This was their first presidential election, the first one in which they were old enough to cast a vote. Wanting to be informed voters, both of them followed the coverage of all the candidates beginning with the primaries. On Tuesday night, they called to let us know they were watching the returns with friends. As they evening wore on, they called again, and then again, and again. Like many of us, they were up most of the night, confused by what was unfolding in front of all of us.

Whether you voted for Clinton or for Trump, there is no denying that this was no ordinary election, which is why we have to talk about it here. Whether you were dismayed or delighted, the results of the election came as a surprise to nearly all of us.

We knew before we got to Tuesday that we were a divided country. The contentiousness of the campaign made that clear. But in the dark hours of Tuesday night and Wednesday morning, the extent of the divide was revealed in purple that looked to me like bruises all over the map, in a vote count that over and over again, county after county, showed the slimmest of margins between red and blue.

We may wonder how the pollsters could have gotten their predictions so wrong, and yet, we also know that as a country we don’t really talk to each other. The rough and tumble discussion and debate across the aisle of political parties, the hallmark of democracy, has been ridiculed by members of our Congress. We know that some of our elected representatives pride themselves on a principled lack of cooperation. They center their approach to governing on the fact that they don’t collaborate or compromise.

But then again, most of us, Democrat or Republican, don’t talk to each other either, at least not about our politics. It’s one of those things that we set aside to be polite, to avoid offending others. Just like religion.

Many, many people have offered their analysis about what the future will look like. The predictions vary widely. As I sought to discern what to say today, I started to feel dizzy trying to take it in. You don’t want to know how many versions of this sermon I have written! As your scout, sent to mine for treasure to lift up on Sunday mornings, I wanted to discover something that rings deep and true. I am also as hungry for hope as you are. What’s clear to me now, however, is that this is all going to take a long time to process.

So here’s one thing I won’t say – that we need to move on. No, many of us are grieving, deeply. Some of us are genuinely afraid for our health and our safety and for that of people we know and love. Part of our task at this time, I believe, is to hold space for one another to grieve, to talk, or to be together in silence, to show up for each other in whatever way is needed, to cling to one another and to cling to God, praying that in time the way forward for each of us and all us together will be made clear.

I also believe, however, that we have another calling in this time as people of faith, and in this, there is some urgency. In the days since the election, emboldened by the results, some have abandoned decency and respect. A steady stream of hate speech was unleashed this week as
people spat the “N word” and spewed out gay slurs at shocked strangers. School children and students on college campuses were harassed, bullied, and assaulted. This happened, and was copied all over the country. Near San Francisco, a home in Noe Valley flew a Nazi flag where children walk by on their way to school. In Raleigh, North Carolina, a group of Latino kids were taunted by white children, who yelled, “Go back to Mexico. We’re getting that wall now.” In New York City, a gay man getting on a bus was told that he should “Enjoy the concentration camps!” At NYU, a group of Muslim students found the door to their pray room vandalized, scrawled with the word TRUMP in bold letters. In school hallways, boys reportedly groped girls as they taunted, “If the President can do it, so can I.” Parents everywhere spent days this past week picking up their children early from elementary, middle, and high schools because they were so upset, they were not able to study.

My friend Peter Marty is a pastor in Davenport, Iowa, in a congregation he’s pretty sure is about 55 to 45 percent Democrat/Republican, a pretty even split. Peter also serves as the publisher of Christian Century magazine. This weekend he wrote, “When a congregational parent of some mixed race kids emailed the day after the election, I knew it was time for a Christian response to the election of Trump.”

The parent wrote, “It’s a difficult day for Aron and Jordan and their friends of color at middle school. They’re feeling vulnerable and scared today. If you see them at confirmation tonight, I’d appreciate you letting them know you value them. They could use a little reassurance.”

“That’s all I needed,” Peter said, “to begin assembling some Christian convictions to share with friends appalled by, or thrilled with, Trump’s victory.” And so he began: “Practice the Beatitudes and you’ll never be tempted to bully.” “Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.” “Resist fear.” “Never view yourself as above forgiveness.”

He goes on from there, but I started asking myself a similar question. What is our calling as Christians in this time? Here’s my list so far.

- To love God who authored our diversity, to honor all people as made in the image of God, to see them as God’s beloved, and to celebrate the rich diversity of the human family.
- To lift up the promise that we are held fast by a love that cannot be shaken, by an embrace that holds tenderly the broken heart, by an understanding that accepts even our conflicted spirits, and by a grace that receives us when our goodness fails.
- To stand with Jesus, who always stands with the least, the last, the lost.
- To protect and defend and raise our voices in support of those who have been ridiculed and threatened, people who have disabilities, people of color, immigrants, Muslims, women, LGBTQ folk, and our youth and children.
- To speak the truth in love and to speak truth to power;
- To give generously and extend hospitality to strangers.
- To pray without ceasing, to pray for enemies, to pray for our leaders, but not to bow to them.
- To follow the Prince of Peace by breaking down the dividing walls of hostility.
• To trust the Easter promise which tells us that there is nothing from which new life cannot rise up.
• To look for and hold onto God’s vision for the world of heaven on earth and to begin to live as if it’s already here.

“Faith,” writes theologian James Whitehead, is the enduring ability to imagine life in a certain way.” Barbara Brown Taylor says this means that “the church’s central task is an imaginative one.” To explain, she paraphrases an old spiritual: It means “we live here like we have another world in view.” We train ourselves to start living as if God’s reality is the only one that matters.

In other words, we lean with Isaiah into the new heaven and new earth, one where children grow up safely and adults all get to grow old. People build houses they get to live in, and vineyards they plant and harvest. The hungry are fed, the afflicted are healed, the ruins are rebuilt, and the light rises against the darkness.

Yes, we are citizens of the United States, but as people of faith, we also get to live in this other realm. We are not limited or defined by the political winds or the cultural tone of our time. Our loyalty, our fealty, our commitment is to God who extends to us a deeper calling.

In the church our charge is to live into the kind of life that is Isaiah’s vision and that is the hope for the whole world. You and I, as people of faith, we are stewards of those things that make such a life possible. We are the stewards of the very things our country and the world most urgently need: compassion and courage, truthfulness and trust, a wide, wide welcome and a love that is lavish.

In the letter our stewardship committee sent is a short paragraph I have found myself turning to again and again in these days. Let me repeat it here:

“Today, more than ever, the world needs the strong, bright witness of faithful congregations like ours. In a time of fear and division in the world and in our country, there is an urgent need for religious communities that value openness and inquiry and practice compassion, collaboration, acceptance, and love. Church communities like ours that embody deep commitments to inclusiveness and to service have a critically important role to play at this moment.”

Friends, this is our time. We were made for this.

In a little while, Libby Black and I will call you to come forward to consecrate our financial pledges to our church for the coming year, to bless them and offer them to God. In our time of reflection, and in our prayer together, I invite you to consider what your offering means for you and for us as a community of faith, and what our individual and collective witness means at this particular moment in history. Our giving is an act of worship, an expression of the commitments and convictions we hold because of our faith. As we dedicate our offerings, may we also dedicate ourselves, all that we have and all that we are, to God’s good purposes in the world.