

Old Testament lesson – Isaiah 65:17-25

New Testament lesson – Luke 23:54-24:12

Best- and Worst-Case Scenario

I mentioned recently that I've been reading a book about WW I. I'm close to the end of the war now. I was rather surprised to learn this past week that very late in the war, in the spring and summer of 1918, the Allies thought Germany was about to defeat them on the western front, despite the entry of the U. S. into the war. Germany was able to transfer 33 divisions from the eastern front after Russia left the war to deal with the Bolshevik revolution and subsequent civil war.

Each side had been drawing up plans throughout the war, hoping for victory and planning what would be the results for Europe if one side won, and how the results would be quite different, of course, if the other side won. For example, a number of nations were depending on the Allies winning so they could become independent nations, hoping to be free from the Austro-Hungarian Empire or the Ottoman Empire. There were also colonies that hoped to gain autonomy by offering their sons to die for the cause of one nation or another.

All these nations, their leaders, their soldiers, and even their civilians, all held various scenarios in their heads for what their world would be like after the war. They all depended on which side won, and not only that. They also depended on whether promises would be kept or broken, whether actions would be rewarded or ignored.

Some years ago I read a book called How Hitler Could Have Won WW II. It described a half dozen or more errors that Hitler made in his strategic decisions that cost him the war. One example was wasting his army on Stalingrad, when he could have used them instead to capture the oil fields of the Caucasus region, which would have supplied his forces with fuel for the rest of the war. He made the same mistake in Africa, where he could have diverted his Afrika Korps to the Saudi oil fields. The book lays out a number of scenarios that would have meant a different outcome to the war. Apparently, there

were good reasons why Hitler never made it beyond corporal in the first war.

Several years ago there was a TV series called "The Man in the High Castle." It was a speculative story about what life would have been like in America if the Allies had lost the war. The eastern portion of America was ruled by the Nazis, and the western portion was ruled by imperial Japan, with a sort of neutral zone in between. It was a very good show, in my opinion.

Then, they turned it from a good show into a great show by introducing a science fiction element into it. Spoiler alert here: it turned out that the world depicted in the series thus far was actually another world, and there was a way to travel between that world and ours. I'll stop there, because the show is worth watching even with that much spoiled.

But it was an interesting scenario, which would have been a nightmare for my parents' generation. The type of oppressive, cruel, and violent rule expected of both Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan was very motivational for soldiers and civilians alike in America, Europe, Asia, and Australia. Life as depicted in the TV show was what many people feared.

God provides some future scenarios in the Bible. One of them is found in our OT lesson. It is a scenario of the world which God will create to replace the world we live in. The first part of this passage has an echo in Revelation 21, a passage which is often read at funerals: *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away...* It goes on to describe the conditions in this new world: no death, no mourning, no crying, no pain.

Isaiah's version is a bit different. There seems to be death, but it is quite delayed. Life is long, and it is pleasant, with houses for everyone and plenty of food. God is close at hand, responding to every prayer and every need.

At the end of the passage is an echo of an earlier passage in Isaiah, chapter 11. That chapter is about a messianic king, a shoot that will come from the stump of Jesse. That would be Jesus. Isaiah 65:25 is very, very close to Isaiah 11:6 and 11:9. A Quaker minister and painter named Edward Hicks created a series of 62 pictures depicting this “Peaceable Kingdom.”

I know that biologists object to this scenario because predators would not eat straw or other food suitable to herbivores, which the predators consider food. Nor would a serpent eat dust. Of course, they miss the point of the scenario. It is a kingdom so peaceable, that nothing, not even predators, would hurt or destroy. Maybe it is hyperbole, or maybe not. The creator of the universe could surely alter animals’ biology if he so desires.

It does sound nice, though, doesn’t it? How good would it be to live in a world where there was no pain and no crying and no death? That means there would be no war, no murder, no violence of any kind. I don’t care if the change in feeding habits offends some biologists, count me in. If you have a better scenario, let me know. I’ll bet it is not really better than God’s.

Now, if you do want to propose a scenario to compete with God’s, please don’t feel like you are some sort of creative genius, the first one to come up with a plan different from God’s.

For much of his ministry, Jesus had been sharing God’s scenario. Now, if it comes from God, it is the best-case scenario. God’s plan is going to be the best possible plan, no matter who is devising some other plan. I mean, he’s God – omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly loving. Any other plan is a distant second.

Of course, compared to God, people are stupid. We’re duller than a butter knife somebody used to cut stone. If you have a bag of hammers, that’s how smart we are compared to God. Unfortunately, being so relatively stupid, we are too stupid to recognize that we are much stupider than God. So we devise our own scenarios.

All the disciples were human. That’s why they

seem so dull when we read the gospels. We seem smarter to ourselves, but it’s only because we have the benefit of knowing the complete story. So try to imagine the scenarios the disciples might have had in their minds.

They have been with Jesus for three years. All the evidence points to him being the Messiah. Remember how I said Isaiah 11 is about a messiah king? That’s what they were expecting. It’s what the Palm Sunday crowd expected. Jesus would enter Jerusalem, and at some point he would reveal himself as the mighty Messiah, end the Roman rule, and usher in the peaceable kingdom in the Promised Land of Israel. They would find themselves in that pleasant scenario described by Isaiah.

Their worst-case scenario was one they had heard Jesus mention: he was going to die in Jerusalem. It would seem that they simply discounted that as impossible. God would not let his Messiah die.

Now, their worst-case scenario happened to be the devil’s best-case scenario. He would just love to throw a monkey wrench into God’s plans, even though monkey wrenches had not yet been invented. But he saw his opportunity as Jesus approached Jerusalem. That where the devil had allies, men who, as Paul would later write, had a form of godliness but denied its power. Thus, they were easily overpowered by the devil, though they did not realize it.

Satan seized upon Judas Iscariot to carry out his plan and effect his best-case scenario. The devil put it into his heart to betray Jesus to the authorities. I have long wondered whether Judas shared the messianic scenario of the other apostles. Was he open to the suggestion of betraying Jesus so that Jesus would be backed into a corner and forced to reveal his messianic identity and power? Would Judas have done this for noble reasons, to usher in the peaceable kingdom, or simply to usher in a kingdom in which he and the other apostles would occupy positions of power and probably wealth? I wish we could know for sure. At any rate, when he

saw what happened to Jesus, he committed suicide. The death of Jesus was, even for Judas, I think, the worst-case scenario.

But for the devil, this was the best of all possible outcomes. The would-be Messiah was dead. God's people had rejected God's Son. Then they *killed* him. It could not possibly have gone any better! Now the devil was free to take full advantage of religion without the interference of people having a personal relationship with God or the Messiah or anything dangerous like that.

What the devil did not realize was that his best-case scenario was actually part of God's scenario. I don't say best-case scenario, because that doesn't really apply to God. God simply has plans, and he carries them out. And his plans should always constitute our best-case scenario. God always has our best interests in mind because he loves us. We simply need to discern what his plan is and submit to it.

That's where the disciples failed for a while. Peter had objected to the idea of Jesus dying. The other disciples probably did too; Peter was just the most vocal. And they all apparently missed the part about being raised from the dead. So his death was their worst-case scenario.

When Jesus died, they hid in fear. Our lesson today does not reach the point where Jesus appeared to the disciples. And Luke's account does not even relate the encounter of any of the women with the risen Lord, as we can read in Matthew's and John's accounts. But all the gospels agree that Jesus was raised from the dead.

It took them awhile to understand what had happened and what it meant. It seems to take many people a long time to understand what happened in the resurrection of Jesus and what it means. The simplest way to sum it up is that death is no longer a threat.

Good Friday was the sacrifice of Jesus to reconcile us to God through the forgiveness of our sins. The resurrection means that because of Good Friday, we have eternal life with God through his Son Jesus Christ.

As I grow older, I find myself reflecting more on death. I suppose it is a form of preparation for the inevitable. But I was thinking a few days ago, and there have been nine times in my life when I skated near thin ice and almost broke through to the other side of death.

When I was three, I fell from a second-story window and landed on my rear end, only inches from a concrete block patio. When I was four-and-a-half, we had a house fire. A workman rolled a burning barrel of something outside, going down the stairs from the kitchen, but those stairs also went to the basement. My mother and I were trapped. She heard a voice tell her to go out the window, a window she had never been able to open. She opened it, pushed me out and then managed to climb out as well. When I was 17, I was in a car that was hit by a train. It did not drag us, but knocked the car across the street into a telephone pole. All four of us walked away with minor injuries.

I was OK then for quite a few years, as far as I recall. I did some risky things, but never incurred serious injury. In 2006, I threw up while I was teaching at Hamilton. I had not thrown up for more than 30 years. I left school and had to stop several times on the way home. I threw up some more at home. Finally, I had my son take me to the hospital, and less than two hours later they removed my appendix. If it had ruptured on the way home, I might not have made it.

In 2017, I had a stroke, which many of you remember. In 2019, I had diverticulitis, which can lead to death if not treated. Shout out to Dr. Harsha Polavarapu for catching that on an X-ray and saving my life.

Last year was the bike ride with the sudden and rude ending. My helmet saved my life that time, indicated by the cracks in the part that protected my medulla oblongata, the part of the brain that controls breathing and heart rate. The next day in the hospital, Annette noticed my stomach swelling. She told a nurse, who collected some people and rushed to my room. It was some sort of kidney malfunction. The nurse

had been a trauma nurse for ten years, and she later said when they came into the room, she thought they were going to lose me.

In February I noticed some signs of a kidney stone. I decided to give it a few days to clear up, which had occurred before. But the night of the soup supper it became quite pronounced, and I decided to go have it checked the next day. But my wife insisted on going to the ER that night. There, they discovered not only two kidney stones, but also some backed up infection which could have gone septic and quickly ended my life.

Nine times I have narrowly missed death. That's better than a cat, because I have at least one more. Maybe some of you have your own stories of close calls. And how many friends and family members have we all lost to death?

But that is the good news of the resurrection of Jesus. Death does not have to be the end. As we approach it – and my stories should tell you that we could meet it any time – as we approach death, one day at a time, I suspect everyone has a scenario in mind of what happens *after* death. Maybe your scenario resembles one of the many jokes about people entering heaven, jokes which I will not tell at this time.

But imagine you reach the locked gates, and there stands Peter with the keys in his hand. He asks why you should be admitted. What will you say?

Scenario 1: “Well, I tried to live a good life and be nice to others.” He checks a list and says, “Hmmm. There is a lot of evidence to the contrary. Sorry, but I can't let you in.”

Scenario 2: “Well, I was active in my church, served on boards and attended church every Sunday. Well, almost every Sunday. Probably once or twice a month.” He checks a book and says, “Yes, I see you did a lot for your local church. However, much of it had little or nothing to do with the gospel or with loving others. I'm sorry, but church activity does not outweigh your sins. I could show you that list, but it would take too long. We have all of eternity, but really,

there's no point. Sorry.”

Scenario 3: “I believed all the things they told me in Sunday school and church. I believe all that stuff about God and Jesus and everything. There's supposed to be a mansion for me here somewhere,” Again, Peter consults a book and says, “I don't find your name here in the book of life. You know of course, that in the letter my friend James wrote, he pointed out that even the demons believe that God is one, and they shudder. And, well, we know where they are, don't we? Sorry.”

There are many similar scenarios, in which people will be disappointed to find out there is nothing we can *do* to earn our way into heaven, not even believing all the right doctrines. So what is the best-case scenario, the one Peter is looking for?

“I don't deserve to enter heaven. But I trusted Jesus to be my Savior and my Lord. I gave him control of my life, as best I could. Perhaps you could ask him about this.”

Bingo. Trust Jesus. I can not emphasize too strongly the vast difference between belief and trust. Faith, genuine faith, is trust. You trust God's love and care in all circumstances. When I was hit by that car, it took me a while for my attention to be on anything but taking care of the pain, though I think they must have given me some pretty good drugs from the get-go. But when I had some breathing room, I asked God why this had happened to me. But it was not a resentful why; I wanted to know what was I supposed to learn? What was the goal here? I never doubted that God somehow had my best interests in mind.

I might have responded differently thirty or forty years ago. The events would have had to unfold so I could look back and understand. I trusted Jesus to be my Savior and Lord more than 50 years ago, but living out the trust has sometimes been difficult.

Do you trust God and his resurrected Son today? Are you at least trying to trust? Or do you just believe, with that belief stored on some shelf

of your life, where you retrieve it for special days like Sundays, Easter, or Christmas?

There is no better day than Easter to hand your life over to the resurrected Lord, and say, "Jesus, I give you my life, my self. Help me to trust you in things great and small, and as you

have forgiven my past sins, forgive me when I fail to trust you as I should. Amen."

I encourage you to do that today. It won't make life easy, but in the difficult times you will know that God is with you. Amen.