

## **My Eyes Have Seen**

*Proverbs 1:20-29; Isaiah 6:1-13*

As I worked through this great vision that Isaiah saw and I've just read to you, I was struck by the fact that my grandparents were the first generation to ever see moving pictures on a screen outside their own imaginations. It was only in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that we became able to produce and see moving pictures anywhere besides in our own dreams and minds. So, in all the countless generations before then, people were confined to describing moving pictures with words and counting on the other person to catch your vision in their own imagination and to reach a common understanding. Before my grandparents, it was only in stories that pictures ever moved.

So God gave Isaiah pictures, visions designed to offer hope to God's people in a generation when life was coming apart, institutions were failing, relationships were breaking, and life as they knew it was about to come to a violent and stormy end. Zion, the great capital that David and Solomon had built as a place where all the world's people could come and find God, Zion would become in Isaiah's day a swollen refugee camp with Assyrian riders and chariots making thunder and raising a dust cloud just outside the city walls. But God showed Isaiah a future in which a new Zion would become higher and more important than any other mountain.

Because a Savior would arise there, a sacrifice would be made there, miracles would happen there that would result in a law and gospel going out from Zion to men and women everywhere teaching them the principles and values and disciplines of peace, writing in their hearts a way of life would ultimately put an end to the dog eat dog, law of the jungle mindset that ruled the ancient world before God sent Christ with a gospel to show humanity a better way.

And we saw last week that in the holy city, David and Solomon had planted a great old family tree that God had promised would bear fruit in a Savior who would rule the whole world and save people from all the world's families and kingdoms. But, by Isaiah's day, all that was left of David's and Solomon's great old family tree was a pathetic non-entity named Ahaz, a faithless and cowardly man who sat on David's throne but who didn't believe in David's God and had no use for David's gospel.

But God showed Isaiah in a vision that as long as the stump survived, no matter how puny and burnt over and dead it might look, as long as the stump survived, there was hope that the tree would rise again. And God showed Isaiah a shoot from Jesse's stump, "*...the branch of the LORD*", Isaiah called him, a future king upon whom God's Spirit would rest and from whom

God's wisdom and goodness and power would flow in a way that would more than make up for all the wants and needs and sins and faults of the men and women who would reach for and long for the goodness of God and not quite get there.

We will fail but God showed Isaiah a Savior who can meet us where we are and bring us close to God, make us right with God, through whatever sin and swirl stands between us and God at the particular moment he meets us and calls for us. And so today Isaiah treats us to a flash-back. In the middle of a series of warnings and visions, Isaiah flashes us back to the day, years before, when God first appeared to him in smoke and fire and thunder and called him to see and tell God's gospel to God's people in a time of trouble.

*"In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple."* Uzziah was Ahaz's grandfather and he was by and large a good king, faithful and godly, prudent and competent, until strangely in his old age he got swept up in some delusion of grandeur that convinced him that he could be more than a king. Centuries before, David had had a vision in Psalm 110 that one day a king of Israel would be appointed by God king and priest both, and Uzziah decided all on his own that he was so faithful and so godly so brilliant that he must be the king God had in mind.

So Uzziah dressed himself as a priest and wandered into the holy place with some sort of offering and immediately God struck him with leprosy, rendering him unfit to even be king. So Uzziah died out of office, something like Nixon did in our day and age. It was a sad example of how even a good man can lose his way with God, and it set into motion the downward spiral that would lead God's people to such confusion and trouble in Isaiah's lifetime. So it was King Uzziah's last year that God appeared to Isaiah on a throne in what appeared to be the holy place in the Jerusalem temple.

We might guess that Isaiah was some sort of night shift priest or Levite who had business in the holy place, and there, all of a sudden, was the Almighty, all flames and smoke and thunder and lightning, and around the Lord were warrior angels called Seraphs, a word derived from the Hebrew for fire.

And these Seraphim, these flaming angels, hovered around the throne, their wings arranged in such a way that they couldn't gaze at God and God never saw their feet, and they sang at a volume that caused the sanctuary doors to heave and shake. Now these were huge bronze reinforced doors, several stories high but in Isaiah's vision they are heaving and shaking, open and shut like an aluminum storm door in a hurricane, just to give you an idea of the force of the vision. *"Holy, holy, holy!"*, they cried out, *"is the LORD of the armies! The whole earth is full of his glory!"*

And Isaiah's response was to think that he'd arrived at Judgment Day. *"Woe is me!"* He cried out, *"For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the king, the LORD of the armies!"* And well might Isaiah be afraid because from the days of Moses that turn of phrase, *"...the earth is full of his glory"* usually meant that God was about judge his people severely. In Numbers 14, God had said these very words before condemning Moses' generation to wander the desert the rest of their lives.

Their faithlessness had cost them their ticket to the Promised Land. And Isaiah knows that his generation had fallen a long way from even that. So for Isaiah, God has appeared for judgment at just the wrong time, too early. Isaiah's not ready, Israel is not ready and all Isaiah can do is weep and mourn the appearance of God all aflame and all a-thunder. But strangely, God and all these flaming angels have come to Isaiah on a mission of mercy. Not that Isaiah could be expected to understand that! Because what he sees is one of the Seraphs, flying from the Almighty toward him with a red hot smoking coal from the temple altar.

The six-winged flaming angel touched Isaiah's lips with a red hot coal. Did it burn? Was Isaiah scarred for life from the experience? I don't know, and I would guess not, but I can guarantee that the experience was terrifying. And even more startling was that what must have been for Isaiah a terrifying moment turned out to be an experience of grace. The hovering warrior declared to Isaiah, *"See this has touched your lips! Your guilt is taken away! Your sin is atoned for!"*

Note this well! Isaiah's not been chosen because he's somehow uninvolved in the sin and decline of God's people. He bears his share of the guilt. But God has called and forgiven Isaiah despite whatever guilt and sin was in him. This terrifying visit, this experience of God's white hot holiness and power was all designed to propel Isaiah into a way of life where he would weave into pictures a gospel where terrifying holiness and liberating grace could work hand in hand to save those people with ears to ear and hearts to care what God is about.

So the seraph touches Isaiah's lips with a burning coal, leaving him unscarred and unharmed, but suddenly changed, willing to trust the God who moments before he thought might destroy him. So when God now cries out, *"Whom shall I send, and who will go for us to this people?"* Isaiah volunteers! He wants to share with his own people something of the holiness he's seen and the forgiveness he's found. *"Here am I, send me!"*, he answers.

And God doesn't sugarcoat the mission Isaiah has volunteered to take on, *"Go and say to these people, 'You will hear and hear and not understand; you will see and see, but not perceive."*

*Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their hearts and turn and be healed.'"*

Isaiah understands that his people are in a downward spiral, but he wants God to show him where things will bottom out. *"How long, O Lord?"* He asks the Almighty, imagining that the people around him can withstand God's holiness and find God's mercy much as he had. But that's not what's in the cards, God has to let him know. How long before God's people catch on and begin to take him seriously again? *"Till the cities lie in waste and uninhabited; and houses without people, and the land a desolate waste."* This generation won't repent in time to save itself, God tells Isaiah.

He goes on, *"And though a tenth remain,"* in other words one out of ten of God's people would survive the Assyrian armies, *"...though a tenth will remain, they will be burned over again, like a teribinth or an oak tree in a wildfire, burned once, burned twice till only the bare stump is left."* The point being that God doesn't need the people of any particular time and place to carry on his plan to save the world. Even if the whole tree burns down, God can make do with what's left in the stump.

Because God reminds Isaiah and us, and Jesus will say it too, God's kingdom is like a tree. What God says to Isaiah is that *"... the seed is in the stump."* The point being that Uzziah's failures or Ahaz's failures or unclean lips or deaf ears or blind eyes can all greatly damage the tree that ran through David and Solomon and would ultimately give us Christ. But like most trees, the kingdom of God is awfully hard to kill. There was a tree in the ditch on Sturgeon Pt. Rd. that the county sawed at the roots about every five years, only to find themselves looking at a full blown tree blocking their ditch five years later.

So the danger here is not that, if we aren't faithful, the kingdom is going to wither away and God won't know what to do. The danger here is that if we won't hear the word of God, if we won't attend to the wisdom of God, the kingdom will move on without us. If we won't abide in the Vine, if we're lopped off, the mustard tree will just grow in another direction. And the loss will be ours and our loved ones who follow us. Because the kingdom is not going to lose, Jesus said. The mustard tree will be the biggest in the garden, mind his words! It is we who will lose if our eyes and ears and hearts are closed to God's word, which leads me to that strange Call to Worship we read today.

Solomon wrote Proverbs some 300 years before Isaiah to his sons hoping to teach the princes in this palace something about wisdom. And, like in Isaiah, Solomon paints word pictures. So Wisdom appears in much of Solomon's poetry as a person, a woman, wandering the highways and byways like Jesus, and like Jesus, she warns people that it's at our own peril that we ignore

God's wisdom. But she also strangely, claims for herself powers and privileges that the rest of the Bible attributes to Jesus, God the Son. Which is interesting because the New Testament in addition to calling Jesus the Way and the Truth and the Life and the Word of God, also calls Jesus "*the wisdom of God*" in 1st Corinthians.

Interesting because as I said, this woman, Wisdom, that Solomon keeps showing us in the Proverbs claims in chapter 8 to have been at the side of the Almighty at creation where John locates God the Son in his gospel, and in our Call to Worship this morning, the woman, Wisdom, told us, "*If you repent at my reproof, I will pour out my Spirit upon you and make my word known to you.*", which is a power and privilege the New Testament attributes to God the Son alone. Something to think about, but for this morning it'll be enough to say when we hear the wisdom of God, and read the word of God, when we are confronted by the holiness of God and offered the grace of God, we need to take it to heart and to let nothing distract us from his call.