

*So the crowd answered Jesus, "We have heard from the law that the Christ remains forever.  
How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?"  
So Jesus said to them, "The light is among you for a little while longer.  
Walk while you have the light, lest the darkness overtake you.  
The one who walks in darkness does not know where he is going.  
While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light."  
When Jesus said these things, he departed and hid himself from them.  
Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him,  
so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:  
"Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?"  
Therefore, they could not believe. For again Isaiah said,  
"He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart,  
lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them."  
Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke about him.  
Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him,  
but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so they would not be put out of the synagogue;  
For they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God."  
**John 12:34-43***

Last week, we left off with Jesus addressing a crowd late in the afternoon on that first Palm Sunday in John's gospel. Jesus had spoken to the people around him of his being planted in the ground much as a farmer might plant a seed early in the season. He had spoken of his being "lifted up," not in the sense of being lifted into the sky to return to heaven, but in that terrible sense of his dying on a Roman cross, a prospect that Isaiah the prophet had foreseen centuries before, but the people listening to Jesus that day preferred other prophecies, prophecies brighter and more hopeful than what we read in our Call to Worship today.

So rather than arguing the particulars as the shadows grow longer, Jesus spoke to the crowd of a looming dusk, spoke to them of days to come when their hearts wouldn't be lit up by the sound of his voice and the power of his presence. "The light is among you for a little while longer," Jesus said, "Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you." And the point was that his being among them right there and right then was an unparalleled opportunity that would never recur in quite the same way. So Jesus urged them, "While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light."

Well...Christ's offer was left hanging that day, no takers to be seen or heard, perhaps because the shadows had reached a length that it was best for everyone there to leave the city before the whole landscape went dark. John tells us that as soon as Jesus was done talking, he "departed and hid from them." The point being that Jesus couldn't become reckless and predictable in a city where he had at least as many enemies as he had friends. John says of Jesus and the people in the temple square: "Though he had performed such signs before them, they still did not believe in him." And this unbelief among God's people was no accident of fate.

It was, John tells us, "...so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah would be fulfilled: "Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" It turns out that some seven hundred years before Jesus was ever born, Isaiah foresaw that Israel's Messiah would be confronted with skepticism and faithlessness on the part of God's people. It had to be, John tells us, "...they could not believe," he writes, and John quotes Isaiah again, "...He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes and understand with their heart, and I would heal them."

Who had blinded old Israel's eyes? Who had hardened the hearts of God's people? John tells us that God had blinded and hardened Jesus' enemies so that they couldn't see his light or understand his words. John works here from two different passages, two different messages Isaiah had received from God. The first, our Call to Worship, was from late in Isaiah's book, probably late in Isaiah's life. The old prophet saw that Messiah would teach a gospel and no one would believe, that no one would see the "arm" of God at work in Jesus' life, no one would recognize an ordinary carpenter from Galilee as the Light God sent them.

The second message John quotes from Isaiah was from early in Isaiah's book, it was among the first words Isaiah ever heard from God. Many of you will remember that Isaiah as a young man had a catastrophic vision of God, storming into old Israel's temple, dressed in thunder clouds and lightening, and moving on the wind, surrounded by angels with more wings than a dragonfly, speaking in voices that set the walls to shaking, and made Isaiah want to cry, but there was no time for that before an angel touched Isaiah's lips with a hot coal from the altar and promised him, "...your guilt is taken away and your sin is atoned for."

And at that point God lets the forgiven prophet know what this hurricane of a visit was all about. The Almighty looks at Isaiah cowering in a corner and asks, *"Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"* And Isaiah, still in the first flush of the forgiveness God promised him, with his newly purified lips which were apparently uninjured by the red hot coal, Isaiah stands up and cries into the howling wind, *"Here I am, send me."* But strangely God tells the young prophet that the people Isaiah would try to reach weren't going to listen. *"Keep on hearing,"* Isaiah would tell them, *"but don't understand; keep on seeing, but don't perceive."*

And the next words God says to Isaiah are the verses John quotes to us this morning as being about Jesus. In the Hebrew, God strangely commanded Isaiah: *"Make the heart of this people dull... blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes...and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."* So in the Hebrew, God commands Isaiah to blind and deafen and harden people who don't want to hear him. But John, equally strangely in the Greek, seven hundred years later, teaches us that God himself had "*blinded*" peoples' eyes and "*hardened*" peoples' hearts when Jesus came calling to save them.

They "*could not believe*," John says of the people who saw Jesus' signs and heard Jesus' words because long ago Isaiah had prophesied that they wouldn't. Now Leon Morris and all his learned friends are anxious to warn us that it is not that God put a spell on the people in the temple square to blind and harden them to the signs and words of Jesus. To the contrary, John himself tells us that: *"many...of the authorities believed in"* Jesus. Rather, our eyes become blind and our hearts become hard when we choose to think what we want and do what we please in defiance of what God's word says to us in a given moment.

We come into the game loving our own prejudices and wanting our own preferences and the very act of breaking God's commands and casting aside his promises, the very act hardens and thickens us so that we will not see and cannot accept what God wants us to do and become going forward. Our choices define us and that becomes God's judgment against us.

Jesus put it this way in Matthew's gospel, he said, *"...to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away."* The point being that learning and believing and living a gospel is not a percentage game. There is no percent of the gospel that will be adequate to save our souls if we close our hearts to God's commands and promises. Because it is our hearts God wants, not a certain rate of gospel performance. Will we let God be God and obey him in matters that are hard for us to understand and accept? Will we be humble enough to learn, honest enough to name our sins and turn from them, no matter how many times it takes us before we get it right?

John closes our passage this morning by reminding us of a strange reality. In the Sanhedrin, among the rulers who in a few days will condemn Jesus to death, were many who would actually turn out to be believers in the end. And among Jesus' disciples, who had followed him for three years, was one who would lose his soul after all that time in Jesus' company, because he saw no glory in hating his own life and heading where Jesus wanted him to go. The point being that our standing with God is less about our accomplishments, less about the offices we hold, and more about the condition of our hearts and the direction our lives are headed. When we hear the truth, do we want more? When we see Christ, will we follow him toward a glory that will cost us the lives we have now?