

Sunday December 17th, 2017

Advent III

PRAYER: We read, O Lord, of the people's surprise when you were born in Bethlehem. They had expected a display of power, but were confronted by a picture of humility. They had looked for a mighty ruler, but were greeted by a lowly baby.

Correct our expectations of this Christmas with the realism of that first Christmas, so that when you come to us, surprise shall give way, now as then, to recognition, and we shall hail you as "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting father, Prince of Peace."

STEWARDSHIP: "How can I repay the Lord for all His gifts to me? I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all His people." (Psalm 116:12, 14)

PASTORAL PRAYER: O Eternal God, we bow before you, our Creator, in awe and gratitude. The grandeur of your majesty overwhelms us. Yet we adore you even more for the constancy of your love.

You do not need us as we need you. You seek us before we seek you. Indeed, it is because you seek us that we seek you at all. So it has been from the beginning of time. And so it shall be until the end of time. For this, dear Lord, we thank you.

Yet we come before you with mixed emotions. Guilt intrudes upon our gratitude, and we are moved to confession. Even though we know better, we insist on setting the terms for our relationship with you: We substitute our lineage for your love in drawing the boundaries of our community; we flatter those who praise us even though they may not praise you; and we recruit you in the service of our mission instead of enlisting ourselves in the service of your mission.

Deliver us from our double-mindedness, O God that we may pursue you with the devotion of the shepherds, praise you with the songs of angels, and present you with a gift even greater than the gifts of the wise men-the gift of ourselves.

As we offer ourselves upon your altar, dear Lord, we do so for the sake of your mission and not ours. We are grateful for all those who bear your cross with us. They do not make the task easy, but they do make it easier. So we pray for the increase of labourers in your vineyard. May the coming of Immanuel so transform the members of Christ's body that you, through us, shall overcome evil with good: moving the well-fed to care for the ill-fed, the strong to rescue the weak, the devout to commune with the indifferent, the well to minister to the sick, the learned to teach the ignorant, the natives to accept the refugees and the haves to remember the have-nots.

O God, as we await the coming of Christ into the world, we pray for the courage to embrace his mission in the world.

BENEDICTION: May the One born in Bethlehem-who joined divinity and humanity, love of God and labour for people-unite heaven and earth, in us as in him. Amen.

Sunday December 17th, 2017

Advent III

Isaiah 61:1-11

“What a Difference Jesus Makes!”

In a situation we can all appreciate; the United States Postal Service was changing its rates for first class postage. The day before the change was to take effect, a long line of people wanted to buy first-class postage stamps at a small-town post office. The little post office was running low on stamps because of the high demand, and was selling only a limited supply to each person so as to help as many people as possible.

The news of the post office’s rationing was greeted with anger, and frustration, as the customers wanted to purchase more than the post office was willing to sell. The solitary postal clerk was taking constant verbal and emotional beatings from one customer after another. She looked ragged from the ordeal, and was about done in. One of the customers, that day, was waiting patiently in line. When it was this customer’s turn, she purchased her allotted quota of stamps and decided to help the clerk out.

She said in a loud voice for all in line to hear, “What do you mean you’re running out of stamps? After all, I’ve only known about this price hike for three or four weeks. I have put it off and off, and now I come in here at the last minute with all the rest of these people and you tell me that you’re running out of stamps! Well, I never!” She gave the postal clerk a big wink, paid for her stamps, and left. The postal clerk had brightened considerably, and you could have heard a pin drop among the people waiting in line. (1002 Humorous Illustrations, pg. 373-374)

Perspective; I mean being able to see a situation from another view point. It may be that having perspective or multiple perspectives is the most critical skill we can attain in our relationships with each other. Sometimes we refer to this ability as “walking in another person’s shoes” or “trying to see things through someone else’s eyes”. The reality, however, is that we often go through life with tunnel vision, or blinders on.

Blinders are, of course, the leather eye shields used on horses so they are not startled by something coming from behind and entering their peripheral view. With blinders on, we see only what we ourselves perceive as the truth or reality. In fact, it is not uncommon when we have our blinders on, for us to get quite angry when other people do not see things the way we see them.

I may have shared before about one of our church members in Brownsburg Quebec who came to a church meeting with a T-shirt on that said, “You are entitled to your opinion, as long as it’s the same as mine.” It may as well have said, “I have my blinders on.” What we forget is that often our own prejudices, emotional state, or experiences cloud our perspective. Such a clouding of perspective is one of the reasons that counseling is so important for us. It helps us see things more objectively.

When Isaiah writes the words we are focusing on today, he is proposing to Israel that they adopt a new perspective. As I have mentioned the last couple of weeks, no one could blame Israel for being discouraged and feeling utterly hopeless.

Sunday December 17th, 2017

Advent III

For many Israelites, there must have been a dark and foreboding thought that God had abandoned them. After all, how else do you explain all this terrible stuff happening. So, imagine sitting somewhere, and listening to Isaiah announce these words, “the Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me, because the Lord has appointed me to bring good news.” Good News? Really? Isaiah, are you blind, can you not see what is going on here? What good news?

I am sure that Isaiah may have got the same reaction as people had to Bobby McFerrin, who sang, “Don’t Worry Be Happy.” What, therefore, is Isaiah trying to do? Change our perspective? Yes, that is exactly what he is trying to do. Isaiah is not blind to the circumstances of Israel; it is just that he is calling on Israel to see beyond themselves, to the greater work of God. One of the lessons of Isaiah is that nothing narrows our perspective, quite like the immediacy of our own personal struggles and pain, especially chronic pain.

As an example; it is very hard to care about your neighbourhood, when you suffer daily, severe back pain. It is very hard, to concern yourself with the Climate Change Conference in South Africa, when you don’t have a job. Our perspective shrinks more and more with each personal challenge. As the Israelites were suffering with: hunger, foreign oppression, and bad leadership, they couldn’t see any good news.

For Israel, “no news” would actually be “great news”. Nevertheless, Isaiah declares that it is his mission, from God, to bring good news. Good news to the poor, meaning to those who are downtrodden or disadvantaged by life. Good news to the broken hearted, or more accurately to “bind up” the broken hearted. Isaiah is saying, the good news will soothe, and restore to wholeness, everyone suffering from and kind of human breakdown.

Good News to captives, for they shall be freed. Here he is not referring to criminals in jail, but people who were sold into slavery because of debt. Isaiah is alluding to the “year of the Lord’s favour” or “year of Jubilee” when all debts would be forgiven, and everything would be restored to its rightful owner. All unjust restriction, placed on people, will be removed.

To bring it to a single thought, Isaiah is saying that all causes of human sorrow will be eliminated. The good news continues; as Isaiah reveals that God will give people a “crown of beauty”, as the Hebrew version states. The people of Israel will be like strong oaks that God plants, giving God glory. The ruins of the cities will be restored, and we can even think of Nehemiah as an example of this restoration. The breakdowns of the past will be mended, even things thought long ago to be irreparable.

Foreigners will be your servants, not slaves by the way. In other words, other nations will be partners in this work of restoration. Riches and prosperity will flow into Jerusalem, and all through Judah. Justice, too, will be the order of the day, as God will not tolerate wrongdoing. The people will be dressed in the clothing of salvation and draped in robes of righteousness. Renewal and rebirth will be everywhere.

Sunday December 17th, 2017

Advent III

It is a grand picture and one of hope. Attractive to us on so many levels; I mean who wouldn't want this? Yet, is it realistic? Looking around this world, we just do not see it. Daily, we are bombarded by messages in the media of one crisis after another. We are promised prosperity, but our pensions are disappearing. Joy, where do we find that? Shame and dishonour, well there are boatloads of that around.

Blessed; O please, how long has it been since we truly felt blessed? Our clothing of salvation and righteousness seems but "filthy rags". How can Isaiah say these things, and how can Jesus in Luke 4:16-22 use these very words to describe himself and his ministry? Where is the good news? All we see is struggle, pain, suffering and despair. Ah, did you see what just happened? "All I see". "All we see". There's that issue of perspective again. All that matters is how I see reality, and my experience of this world.

Let us entertain, for just a moment, the possibility that the reason things seem so bad, is because that is how we see them, or even how we think we should see them. I don't know how many of you have ever been to a carnival, or a county fair, and had opportunity to enter a Fun House. What I mean by a Fun House is a ride or structure, where everything is distorted. Floors are moving or spinning, and usually they have loads of mirrors.

Not just any mirrors, but funny mirrors that distort how we appear. Some mirrors make us look very squatty and fat, while other make us tall and thin. The question is: are any of these distortions the real picture of us; of course not. I remembered a famous verse written by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:11-13, that is all about perspective.

Paul writes, "It's like this: when I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child does. But when I grew up, I put away childish things. Now we see things imperfectly as in a poor mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God knows me now." Perspective!

Shall we be honest for a moment, and admit that we do not see with perfect clarity. Our perspective is all messed up. We see things like how Pablo Picasso painted them; all twisted and distorted. When Jesus read these words of Isaiah in his own hometown synagogue, the people were so trapped in their distorted perspective; they actually sought to kill Jesus by throwing him off a cliff.

Jesus whole life and ministry is punctuated by conflict of perspective. Right from Bethlehem, where he came in humble means, others saw his coming as a threat and like Herod tried to destroy him. The bible is full of people who refused to take off their blinders, to expand their peripheral vision: Herod, the Pharisees, Sadducees, religious leaders, the Roman Governor Pilate and many more.

Even today, many will not take those blinders off. They are content to sit in front of a poor mirror and see things dimmed by a faulty perspective. We cannot see the good news because frankly, we don't want to.

Sunday December 17th, 2017

Advent III

The only perspective we value is our own and that of those who agree with us. The only good news we see as valuable, is what meets the immediate need of my perspective.

Maybe the reason we don't feel much like the bridegroom in his wedding suit or the bride with her jewels, is because we would rather everyone see our misery and our filthy rags, because at least we know these are of our own creation. I came across a quote from a book with the very interesting title *The Trivialization of God*, written by Donald McCullough.

In his book, McCullough quotes Freeman Patterson, noted Canadian photographer, describing barriers that prevent his from seeing the best photo possibilities. *"Letting go of the self is an essential precondition to real seeing. When you let go of yourself, you abandon any preconceptions about the subject matter which might cramp you into photographing in a certain, predetermined way..."*

When you let go, new conceptions arise from your direct experience of the subject matter, and new ideas and feelings will guide you as you make pictures. In the spiritual life, just as in photography, being preoccupied with self is the greatest barrier to seeing. But when we get past it, we catch glimpses of extraordinary beauty. That is what Isaiah was trying to tell Israel, and Jesus was trying to tell his home town.

If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, then we had better get our eyes focused on the right thing. I can think of no more important message for us as we go through the Christmas season. Here we are celebrating the most selfless, beautiful gift ever given to humanity, and the beauty gets lost, because we focus on the bad news this season brings. We hear it all the time.

"Man, I hate those busy malls. I am just dreading cooking that Christmas feast. What am I going to get my uncle or aunt; they are so hard to buy for? Just think about how high my visa bill will be. Oh, brother, driving four hours to sit and listen to screaming kids, wanting to know, "is that all", after they open their gifts. Then there is the dreaded planning, to somehow get back home in time to get out for the boxing week bonanza.

I don't know if you are familiar with a movie that came out a few years back called, *Four Christmases*. It stars Vince Vaughn, who, with his wife, plots every year to escape from family obligations at Christmas by going on a vacation. They do this to avoid the four separate Christmas gatherings their divorced parents now host. The couple, in question, does not tell their families they are going on vacation; instead they report they are going on some sort of volunteer relief mission oversea.

The story's premise of course, hangs on the fact that their little secret gets discovered, and to make amends they must now attend the four Christmas events. The story resonates with us because who hasn't dreamed of being in Tahiti, instead of trying to assemble toys at three in the morning, to surprise children who will likely enjoy the box more. If we feel like that, then our perspective is all messed up.

Sunday December 17th, 2017

Advent III

We are seeing things dimly, even despite the thousands of coloured lights we spent hours hanging on our eavestrough. Jesus' coming at Christmas is good news. He has come to bind up the broken hearted, to set the prisoner free, to proclaim the Year of the Lord's favour on all people, especially those who feel defeated by life. If we cannot see the good news in our Christmas celebrations, it is not God's fault.

It is our perspective that is all out of whack. Every aspect of the Christmas story, from the birth in a stable to the wise men from east, is designed to shatter our perspective and get us to see things from God's perspective, and with God there is always good news.

There is a story from a few years back about a woman who climbed out on top of a fifty-five story building in New York City, ready to jump to her death. The police suicide squad took her threats extremely seriously. She didn't look like the typical person who would do this, as she was dressed in an expensive dress and was obviously very careful about her appearance.

Regardless of her appearance, every attempt to convince her to come down from the ledge ended in failure. One of the police officers called his pastor to come to the scene and pray for the woman. His pastor came, and after appraising the situation, asked the police captain if he might try to get close enough to talk to the woman. The captain shrugged and said, "Sure, what have we got to lose?"

The pastor started walking toward the woman, but she screamed as before, "Don't come any closer or I'll jump!" He took a step backward and called out to her, "I'm sorry that you believe no one loves you." This got her attention and also the suicide squad-it was such an unusual thing to say. "Your children and grandchildren must not love you. Apparently they never gave you any attention," he continued.

With this the woman took a step toward the pastor and said, "My grandchildren love me. My whole family does. My grandchildren are wonderful. I have eight grandchildren." The pastor took a step closer to the woman and said, "Well then, you must be very poor, or you wouldn't want to take your own life."

The woman, who was obviously overweight, said, "Do I look like I go without meals? We live in a very nice apartment in Central Park. I'm not poor!" The pastor then took another step and was now only three feet from her. "Then why do you want to kill yourself? I don't understand." The woman thought for a moment and said, "You know, I don't really remember." (Hot Illustrations, pg. 189-190)

There is plenty of good news brought by Jesus. If we cannot see it, then we need to ask that with all the presents we open this Christmas, God will also open our eyes. Because if you want your life to be better, more hopeful, then you need Jesus in the heart of it all; because Jesus makes all the difference.