

Isaiah 9:2-7
Luke 11:33-35

First Sunday of Christmas
Midway Presbyterian Church
January 1, 2023

Turning Blindness into Sight

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

In our Old Testament Lesson today the prophet Isaiah sees a vision of hope for the people of Israel who are in anguish, humiliated by defeat. Listen to these words from Isaiah 9:2-7...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

In our Gospel Lesson we hear Luke, “the beloved physician,” (Col. 4:14) share Jesus’ words about the light within. Listen to Luke 11:33-35...

Sermon

A man planning his first visit to New York City asked a friend who knew the city well, to tell him what New York was really like. The friend said that New York was both the best city in America and the worst city in America, depending on what a person looked for.

In New York he could visit some of the country’s most historically-interesting churches, and in the art galleries see some of the most beautiful paintings in the world. He could hear some of the world’s greatest music, and view some of the finest dramatic productions anywhere. He could eat in elegant restaurants, observe the latest fashions, gaze at impressive architecture, and partake of a cultural feast to gladden the heart of the most discriminating person.

On the other hand, in that same New York he could find some of the worst slums imaginable, see some of the most hardened criminals, visit some of the cheapest and most vulgar honky-tonks. He could associate with people who had sunk to the lowest level of life in every regard. So, whether his visit was to be one of enlightenment and inspiration or one of despair and discouragement, that would depend largely upon what he looked for.

Our celebration of the Lord's Supper on this first day of a New Year can be seen either as a sentimental ritual, or as *Holy Communion*, a sacrament—an outward and visible act, with inner and spiritual meaning; the door of the soul to the ministry of Christ our Lord, whereby we are comforted, cleansed, healed, and nurtured.

You know, in many of life's challenges we can see either crisis or opportunity. We can most often view the changes of life or vocation either as enemies to be avoided, or as possibilities for new discovery, achievement, and fulfillment. Usually, it is not so much what life presents us, but the view, the perspective that we hold that sees either light or darkness, life or death.

Born on June 27, 1880, in West Tuscumbia, Alabama, Helen Keller lost her sight and hearing after a bout of illness at the age of 19 months. Yet, with the help of her first teacher and life-long companion, Anne Sullivan—"the Miracle Worker"—she came to see beauties and wonders as few will ever behold. Once she said,

I have walked with people whose eyes are full of light but who see nothing in sea or sky, nothing in city streets, nothing in books. It were far better to sail forever in the night of blindness with sense and feelings and mind, than to be content with the mere act of seeing. The only light-less dark is the night of darkness in ignorance and insensibility.

In this regard, Jesus said:

“Your eye is the lamp of your body. If your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light; but if it is not healthy, your body is full of darkness. (Luke 11:34)

Jesus' words here are spoken to the crowds he had just rebuked for their failure to perceive that One greater than Solomon or Jonah is present. They lack spiritual insight; they can't see what is before their very eyes in the person of Jesus.

Just as the body is illuminated by the eye, so also there is a spiritual eye, through which the whole being of a person is either illuminated or dwells in darkness. If the spirit which guides

our actions is selfish and greedy, our total being will be selfish and greedy. “Bah! Humbug!” said the miser Ebenezer Scrooge in Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. But if it is humble, compassionate, and generous, we will be humble, compassionate, and generous. Again, a person may think his moral and spiritual faculties are a guide to life, but if they are not sound, if they are actually darkness, diseased, how completely dark he is!

Thus, the treasure of having in us the same mind that was in
Christ our Lord. (Phil. 2:5)

Jesus encountered many who had lost this ability to see clearly the truth that was before their very eyes. The kingdom of God was with men and some saw it not at all. “He came unto his own, and his own received him not.” (Jn. 1:11) Others saw him as one possessed by demons. It is a solemn thought that God’s light can only shine into lives with eyes to see. The seed of the gospel will not grow on a path where birds can eat it up, or in hard, rocky places without much soil, or where thorns and weeds grow up and choke the young sprout. (Lk. 8:4-8)

This truth can be illustrated at every level of experience. Sun and rain, stars and moon, mountains and streams—may all be seen as commonplace and taken for granted. Or they may be seen as gracious wonders that point to the divine Creator, that display the glory of the Lord our God. As the English poet William Wordsworth put it:

To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.
(“Imitations of Immortality from Recollections” of *Early Childhood*)

Only the humble and uncalculating can behold the glory of God. But self-interest, or preoccupation with what things or people can do for us, will cloud our vision. People or societies filled with pride, greed, envy, and lies, have something like a spiritual cataract and cannot see the light of Jesus. The message of the gospel is clear enough to give God’s light.

But yes, “there are none so blind as those who will not see.” As the prophet Jeremiah once declared to the corrupted people:

Hear this, O foolish and senseless people,
 who have eyes, but do not see,
 who have ears, but do not hear. (5:21)

And in the third chapter of the Gospel of John we read:

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. (3:19)

And so, as we walk through the gate of a new year, let us pray for sound spiritual sight, which sees in a feeding trough the Savior, the King of Kings; which sees in the cross, not a sign of defeat, but a sign of the depth of God’s love, and victory over sin and death; which reads a biblical word of promise and finds hope in the midst of hardship; which looks upon God’s creation with awe and wonder and gives thanks for the miracle of life; which sees what we have as gifts entrusted to us to use wisely, as good stewards.

The Wise Men saw in the infant child, a Savior, Christ the Lord. And they worshipped him, offering precious gifts. While Herod the king saw in the same infant a threat to power, and set out to have him killed. One vision was full of light, the other full of darkness.

Some only see Christmas as a secular orgy and a world gone mad with getting and giving. Some only see a sentimental season with just a transient and tarnished sparkle. Some only see a sadness behind the revelry—fears that haunt the heart, and hopes dimmed by the troubles of the times. But some see a Savior, Christ the Lord, the light of the world, who leads us out of our darkness. And in such seeing they take heart.

In the first chapter of John’s Gospel we read:

In him was life and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it. (1:4-5)

Later our Lord said:

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12)

Later still, Saul of Tarsus, who had been a persecutor of the Church of Christ, along the road to Damascus was encountered by that light, and his life and purpose were forever changed.

Isaiah had foretold all this as though it had already taken place,

The people who walked in darkness
 have seen a great light;
 those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
 on them light has shined. (9:2)

I took my sermon title this morning from the contemporary hymn by Rusty Edwards:

Praise the one who breaks the darkness
 with a liberating light.
 Praise the one who frees the prisoners,
turning blindness into sight.
 Praise the one who preached the Gospel,
 healing every dread disease,
 calming storms and feeding thousands
 with the very bread of peace.

No, Luke would not have us see things through rose-colored glasses, but neither would he have us fail to see the rose for dwelling on the dirt. With sound vision, we are able to see that Christmas, that the Sacrament of Holy Communion, that Worship, can express the living presence of God in Christ. For Holy Communion is not a sentimental ceremony, but a sign of divine presence and love and forgiveness in our midst, bringing inner joy and peace and hope, even in a land of deep darkness.

If needs be, let us pray, “Lord, that I might receive my sight.” That the divine physician might correct any blurred vision of the eye of my soul.

Come now to this Table of Light and Life. See yourself as you really are. See your needs, your hopes, your fears. But see also what you can be by the grace of God. All you who labor and are heavy laden, come with open hearts to receive the tender mercies of God, giving thanks for his unspeakable gift in Christ. O come, let us adore him.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.