

Sermon Title: "Seeing Again for the First Time"

December 24, 2006

Text: Isaiah 6:9-10; Luke 2:1-20; John 1

Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI

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I've had a song of Isaiah humming in my mind this week. Not the one we read together this evening: the prophet's call to Israel to hope at the edge of extinction that God was not quite done with them—"For unto us a child is born..." The song that's been humming in my mind this week is the one sung when, as a child, Isaiah first felt the movement of God's Spirit pressing against his life. You remember the scene, as he sat in the temple and suddenly sensing God's presence overwhelming the place; the hot coal snatched from the altar and placed against his lips. A voice cried out, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" and little Isaiah, with the pluck of David faced off against Goliath says, "Here I am; send me!"

The song that's been running through my head is the one that God then planted in Isaiah's soul. Go and speak this to this people, God says. I need the slightly older words of the Revised Standard Version, rather than the ones you'd find if you followed along in the pew bibles: "Hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see but do not perceive." That's the main tune, set off by the variation of the next verse, which doesn't really translate well in either version: "Make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."

There's some interpretive controversy as to just what this little ditty, and especially the variation, intends. The troubling reading suggests that one of the natures of God works in such a way as to prevent us from seeing what we need to see in order to find our salvation. It's the same nature of God that hardens Pharaoh's heart when Moses sought the release of God's people from bondage. And it is, frankly, an interpretation that, though compelling, I'd rather not take up in the glow of this Christmas Eve's candles.

*Another* interpretation portrays a realist God, who understands human nature—the fact that we can see the same thing a hundred times over, and still not *get* it; that something can be explained to us eight ways to eternity, and still we will not understand. It is this interpretation that has been weighing on my mind as I've moved through the waning days of Advent, and made the turn down a back street in Bethlehem, tagging along after some displaced shepherds as we made our way to a stable out back of a familiar inn, to see in the dim light the One of whom the Angels sang.

I don't know what planet you've been on if you've not heard what this is all about. It's been blasting at us from radios and Musak at the mall, we've heard it at the grocery store, and as we stand shivering while we fill the gas tank. It's been smuggled even into the most secular of places: the high school holiday extravaganza, at the bank, and waiting in line at the post office. It has been sung by everyone from the Mormon Tabernacle Choir to Eminem; from Bing Crosby to Burl Ives, to Josh Groban to the Chipmunks. "Sweet silver bells all seem to say sweep cares away, Jesus is born," "away in a manger". We've heard it from Angels on high and from the pa rum-pa-pa-pum of the little drummer's drum. But here's that gnawing tune of Isaiah. Do we even begin to understand?

We've *seen* it. With our own two eyes we've seen it! You saw it on a dozen lawns as you drove here tonight, and in the small mountain of cards we've sent to each other, in order to wish each other a Merry Christmas. We've seen Charlie Brown's version of it and Garfield's version of it, and maybe this year you made it to the theater to see the latest Hollywood version of it. In this post-Mel Gibson age even studio moguls have learned that there's a buck to be made in letting people have a peek. We've been watching it painstakingly unfold right here around us in the sanctuary, from greens to wreathes to brightly lit trees, and poinsettias and just a candle or two. We've seen, hums Isaiah, and we have seen.

But what, exactly, have we perceived? Are we perched at the edges of our seats, longing for the mystery to unfold, or have our hearts just grown a little fatter for all the cookies and candies, our ears a little heavy from the jingle and jangle, our eyes droopy with near exhaustion from the holiday rush? We have heard, and heard. But have we understood. We have seen, and we have seen. But have we perceived with the shepherds "This thing that has taken place that God has made known to us"?

Has it begun to dawn on us that at the core of this season is the most audacious claim, put boldly by John, that God is in this world in just the same way that light is in darkness? We are at a competitive disadvantage on this count because through the good Mr. Edison's inventiveness we really have no way of comprehending what it might mean to dwell in darkness—what it would be like to live in a world in which, if the fire went out, the only possible relief would be the breaking of dawn. Without darkness, I'm afraid we take the light for granted.

The closest I've ever come was when I was lying on my back, looking up at the sky with my sister in Kenya after the generators of the resort we were staying in had been turned off for the night. We looked up at the pale light of the Milky Way—tiny pinpricks of light trillions of miles away, sent off from stars and galaxies that would dwarf our own. It's light that would have traveled at the very least four and a half years through a vast emptiness to reach my eye. That's the way light is in darkness. John's right, the darkness simply cannot overcome it. When first that light shines, all the darkness that surrounds it becomes nothing more, and nothing less, than the place in which that light can be seen.

It is a vast darkness, to be sure. If you want your mind bent just a bit, consider that if there is a light to your life, it will have to shine out into that cosmic darkness a hundred times longer than there has been life on this planet before it will ever reach many of those stars you can see shining in the skies when you step out of the warmth of this sanctuary. Then consider that this is what everything we've been seeing and hearing is all about: that the God of *all* that creation is in this world as that light, present before us and beyond us, and without which whatever life we might possess is only a shadow. The Light of the World, come among us. Do we understand? Can we even begin to see?

What an amazing truth emerges as we allow our eyes to adjust to that faint light shining out of that stable, behind a familiar inn in Bethlehem of Judea, as that Word becomes flesh, and dwells among us, full of grace and truth. In the light of this holy night we begin to see that the name of this God who has been calling to us throughout the long night is not, "The disinterested cosmic engineer" or "the ruthless and capricious judge". The name of the God who meets us in the light

of this night, whom we hear in the gentle rhythmic breathing of a newborn held close in his mother's arms, is *Love*, and not *any* love, but a Love that longs to be With Us!

This is a dazzling—a breath-taking—truth. Imagine what it must have been like to be one of those shepherds, abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks, staring up at those same stars that entranced me on the Kenyan plains, when one of those stars seemed to shine just a little more brightly, and seemed to move. Maybe it's just a shooting star, but no, it's movement is not so erratic, or random. This light is searching, guiding, directed exactly to the place where you lay. It grows, and grows until all other light is dimmed, and then bursts upon you like a song. "Unto you is born this day, in the city a David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord!"

Is this what it would be like to be lost, like one of those tragic mountaineers we've been reading about this week, searching the skies for some ray of hope, when finally one of those lights takes its beam directly on you, and you realize that beyond all hope you've been found; rescued; brought back to life? If you'd seen it, if you'd heard it, Isaiah whispers—if it had really happened to you—do you imagine you could *ever* see the rest of the world in the same way?

Is there any possibility that what passes for love in this world but too often ends up a cynical manipulation, would do for you? Could you look on another suffering soul and not want to extend the warmth and light that has been so freely and graciously spread to you? Could you hear the cry of injustice and not want to shout out that it is *not* the way it must be? If we *had* heard, if we *had* seen, how can we ever go back into the darkness and see it in the same way? How could our lives *not* be transformed—in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye?

If we had seen, and heard, then when we turned from the manger, and back toward the dusty street, we could not possibly have seen a deep and enveloping darkness, but only that place in which the light of God's love is still to come, if we, you, and I, would only be its bearer. Our lives would be turned inside out, as we became the bearers of the Good News we seek, still beside the shepherds who ran back out into their fields, "glorifying and praising God" for all we had seen and heard, as it had been told us.

And so we strain, in this silent night, to hear once more what we've heard so many times. With hearts grown fat, and ears grown heavy, our eyes weary and longing for rest. And it's another prophet's song that starts to hum in my mind—Habakkuk, who a generation after Isaiah kept hope alive as Israel's fortune continued to fade. "There is still a vision for the appointed time," he promised. "It speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay."

In a few moments we will step back out into a world whose need of God's saving presence is every bit as real as the one into which the shepherds ran. It is a world that came into being through the one whose birth we celebrate, yet a world that, though laced with His presence, continues not to hear, not to see, or understand. It is the very same world into which God's own self was poured out, in that manger, on that Holy night, yet a world that still does not receive him.

But to all who do, “who believed in his name, he gave the power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or the will of flesh, or of any human intention, but of God. “ That Word, that Light, that Truth—that Love longing to be *with* us—became flesh. And still, to all who see and hear, he dwells among us. And through his glory we too can see, and hear, we can know and understand the depth of God’s love for us, and for this world. Now and forever God is with us—one of us—loving us to life full of grace and truth.

Thanks be to God.