

Seeing in the Dark
Isaiah 61:1-11
Luke 1:46b-55

“...for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.”

Sometimes the point of a sermon comes to me only after I have preached it—sort of like the point of a difficult encounter with someone you love. You turn over and over in your mind the details in search of the real matter at hand and it eludes you until you stop thinking about it. When I looked at the lessons on tap for this Sunday, I was still thinking about last Sunday and immediately dismissed the reading from John’s Gospel on the Baptist because, I thought, we dealt with him last week. On to Third Isaiah and Mary’s Magnificat--and, I promise, we will get to them soon enough. However, in wrestling with this week’s lessons for a blessing, the real matter at hand in last week’s lessons came into view: the matter of repentance. In order to do business with the reversals of fortune anticipated in Isaiah and promised in Luke this Sunday, we must return to Mark’s spare beginning again, and to the point of the Baptist’s sermon that now seems pretty hard to miss.

John appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” Mark reports. He declared that in order to be ready for the coming of God into human history—in order to see God’s hidden presence approaching us in the darkness where only God’s absence is felt—we had better repent, turn around, do a complete about face. John aside, how does it happen that we ever turn around in our lives? Sometimes we turn around when the direction we are headed in is not working for us. Though more often than not, because we are so sure our direction is the right direction in a world going in the wrong direction, we double down on our determination to keep on keeping on. It is the other people who need do a 180 degree turn, we think, so that they are going the right way, our way.

But back to John and to the religious reversal known as repentance. What struck me in the darkness of this week was the fact that John did not tell a particular group of people that they needed to repent. He did not single out certain bad actors in the wilderness and take them to task. He told everyone within earshot that they must turn around if they were going to be ready for God to walk into their present wilderness. Remember that by the time Mark wrote his Gospel, he was writing primarily to two groups of Jews—one that would turn out to be Rabbinic Judaism and the other that would turn out to be the church—both walking in the dark in what was characterized in the Gospels as opposite directions. As we know all too well these days, opposite is barely a breath away from oppositional. Not: “You go your way and I’ll go mine.” Rather: “My direction is right and yours is wrong.” On Tuesday night at the Philadelphia Free Library, former priest turned novelist James Carroll characterized this way of seeing in the dark as bifocal: “religion versus politics; natural versus supernatural; faith versus reason; meaning versus fact; now versus then; ethical present versus apocalyptic future; Gospel versus history; fiction versus truth; metaphorical versus metaphysical. This divided mindedness [this bifocal way of seeing] may have come into its own in modernity,” Carroll supposes, “but it pervades our story, reaching all the way back nearly to the start.”

Start with John’s “baptism of repentance” and with Jesus’ command in Mark to “repent and believe in the good news,” both addressed to a divided community. The physical effect of two divided people turning around who are walking in the opposite direction is that the two begin walking toward each other. Slowly the distance between us (which is one way of talking about sin)--a distance that is getting greater and greater, step by step--begins to grow smaller and smaller as we come closer and closer, until two possibilities come into focus: either we will see one another for the vulnerable human being each is, or we will need to come up with some new

way to deny the human in the other (for the other to deny the human in us). Let me be clear: this is not about agreeing or disagreeing; this is not about changing the other's mind or changing our own mind about some issue. It is about coming close enough to see the humanity of the other: close enough to see as the other sees, hear as the other hears, feel as the other feels, and so to dwell in the hopes and fears that are peculiarly theirs as though they were ours.

Mostly this is unimaginable, and I think it is unimaginable because usually in the world as we have ordered it, a power differential is involved that precludes mutual vulnerability. The only near-at-hand exception that comes to mind is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa where victim and victimizer met in a tragic equality of brokenness; and, looking one another in the eye, each attempted to break free of the past by telling and hearing the story of each other's humanity destroyed by apartheid. Repentance looks like that, it seems to me. A turning toward and seeing the other in such a way that the once powerless is freed of anger and hatred and the once powerful is freed of guilt and malice. "Love means that I emerge from the security of what I am in myself," theologian Robert Jenson says, "and risk myself out there in the world that is neither my inner world nor your inner world, but *precisely the world between us in which we can be together.*" As I said, this is humanly unimaginable, which brings us, at long last, to Third Isaiah and Mary's Magnificat.

Whereas Second Isaiah was written as a word of hope to God's people in exile, Third Isaiah is addressed to repatriated Judeans whose country and temple are in ruins. Writing in the last decades of the sixth century, Third Isaiah must deal with the bitter enmity that now exists between rival groups in Judah, their hopelessness pitting them against each other. "We wait for light," the people lament in Isaiah's 59th chapter, "and lo! there is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom." For Third Isaiah, the question of God's relation to injustice and social

unrest was front and center. “Can God’s word be found,” biblical exegete Paul Hanson asks, “...in the acrimonious conflict between fighting factions within the Jewish community...?”

Likewise, we now know enough to hear Mary’s song in Luke as a song sung in the face of the destruction of the temple, sung in sight of crucifixes surrounding the city, sung to a people defeated and now divided against one another as they also struggle with the question of God’s presence in their present darkness and division.

Both texts promise that the reversal, which is the repentance necessary before we can see a sliver of light in the darkness, will be accomplished in human history by God. God has sent his servant into the thick of Judah’s acrimony to hearten the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, provide garlands rather than ashes to those that mourn in 520 B.C. And the same God, some 500 years later, seeing the plight of the lowly, is sending an ancestor of David to scatter the proud in the imaginations of their hearts, bring down the powerful from their thrones, send the rich empty away. The high and the low, the powerful and the powerless will be brought to a place where they see each other face to face, where they will stand close enough to see as the other sees, hear as the other hears, feel as the other feels. “Every valley will be lifted up and every mountain made low; the uneven ground level and the rough places plain.”

“*Then,*” whispers Second Isaiah, first into the hopelessness of Jerusalem in ruins in 520 B.C. and next amid the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. and now into the oppositional madness at the end of this year of our Lord 2014, “*then* the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together.” I take that to mean that there is no glory to be seen by any unless all see it together. There is no glory to be seen in the dark as I hunker down on the Hill in the safety and security of my skin and my stuff while those in the valley of the shadow of

darkness, working three jobs, will have an average of thirteen times less income to report at the end of this year. There is no glory to be seen in the dark as I pay my \$35 deductible at the doctor's office, thank you all very much, while another member of this congregation with still no access to health insurance is suddenly facing an insurmountable debt because his heart keeps skipping a beat. There is no glory to be seen in the dark as our children, well-educated privately or in the public classrooms of suburban schools, are waiting to hear from six colleges, while the children born into the poverty of this city have no books, no desks, no water fountains, no future. There is no glory to be seen unless it should happen that the reversals announced by Third Isaiah and promised in Mary's song should begin to turn even our lives around and toward a child born to an unwed mother, in the poverty of a cave, outside the little town of Bethlehem.

In him, the Gospel writers say, God turned toward us, came close enough to see as we see, hear as we hear, feel as the we feel, and so to dwell in the hopes and fears that are peculiarly ours as though they were his. But they say more: say that in him God took upon himself our lowly estate, revealing not only the glory of God but the glory of being human, of being given time and space to see one another as God sees us, through God's redeeming eyes.

"There remains an experience of incomparable value," Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote at Christmas in 1942. "We have for once learnt to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled—in short, from the perspective of those who suffer. The important thing is that neither bitterness nor envy should have gnawed at the heart during this time, that we should have come to look with new eyes at matters great and small, sorrow and joy, strength and weakness, that our perception of generosity, humanity, justice and mercy should have become clearer, freer, less corruptible. We have to learn that personal suffering is a more effective key, a more

rewarding principle for exploring the world in thought and action than personal good fortune. The perspective from below must not become the partisan possession of those who are eternally dissatisfied; rather we must do justice to life in all its dimensions from a higher satisfaction, whose foundation is beyond any talk of 'from below' or 'from above,'" but is the God who sees us headed in the opposite direction of love, enters our present darkness, and is turning us, even now, toward Bethlehem.