

Isaiah 42:14-21 (New International Version)

- 14 "For a long time I have kept silent,
I have been quiet and held myself back.
But now, like a woman in childbirth,
I cry out, I gasp and pant.
- 15 I will lay waste the mountains and hills
and dry up all their vegetation;
I will turn rivers into islands
and dry up the pools.
- 16 I will lead the blind by ways they have not known,
along unfamiliar paths I will guide them;
I will turn the darkness into light before them
and make the rough places smooth.
These are the things I will do;
I will not forsake them.
- 17 But those who trust in idols,
who say to images, 'You are our gods,'
will be turned back in utter shame.

Israel Blind and Deaf

- 18 "Hear, you deaf;
look, you blind, and see!
- 19 Who is blind but my servant,
and deaf like the messenger I send?
Who is blind like the one committed to me,
blind like the servant of the LORD ?
- 20 You have seen many things, but have paid no attention;
your ears are open, but you hear nothing."
- 21 It pleased the LORD
for the sake of his righteousness
to make his law great and glorious.

I've had vision problems for a long time. They don't go back as far as the blindness of the man in today's Gospel reading, but my nearsightedness started in grade school. It escaped detection at first because only one eye was affected. The county nurse came to school to test eyesight. A chart full of E's was at the other end of the room. She covered one eye and gave the instructions to point in the direction the letter did. At the time I couldn't figure it out as I was doing what she asked, but she kept scolding me. Later I realized that she must have been looking at my right hand to do the pointing and being lefthanded, I used the other hand. Anyway, I couldn't see the chart with my left eye, but each time she crabbed at me she put down the patch, so I memorized the line and somehow passed the test. But by the next year I got glasses. However, I rarely wore them because I could still see well with one strong eye. Eventually correction was needed in both eyes and in midlife came bifocals.

Some people sing the praises of laser surgery, but I have always been hesitant—what if I would be among the percentage for whom it fails? The miracle Jesus performed in the Gospel is a better marvel. But we hear of an even greater benefit in the Old Testament reading.

GOD GIVES SIGHT TO THE BLIND

- I. Look out for the destruction v14-15, 17
- II. Follow His leading v16, 21
- III. Take a close look at yourself v18-20

With the sight that God gives through this text, look out for the destruction. His patience will end. We get impatient with the world. We look at terrible events that happen or conditions in society and wonder, "How can God allow so much evil? Why does He put up with all the disobedience toward His commandments?" He admitted, "For a long time I have kept silent, I have been quiet and held myself back." Elsewhere He tells us that He is patient as He waits for people to repent. He allows the world a time of grace. Actually we are glad for that or we would all have been gone long ago.

Things will change. "But now, like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant." Some of you have had that experience. You may normally be reserved and dignified, but at that time you became vocal. There is a growing intensity in the verbs of that statement. God cannot hold back forever.

His fury will burst forth. Results come from the blast of His fiery breath. "I will lay waste the mountains and hills and dry up all their vegetation; I will turn rivers into islands and dry up the pools." Mountains look durable, like they should be around forever. Not so. There are effects over time from erosion, landslides, and earthquakes. All things of this earth will one day come to an end. God's destruction will dry up all the growing plants and even the rivers. Part of the message of Isaiah was that God would soon take action against the nation of Babylon after it conquered His people of Judah and took them into exile. Finally He will bring this judgment upon all evil.

That will bring shame to the worshipers of idols. "Those who trust in idols, who say to images, 'You are our gods,' will be turned back in utter shame." At the beginning of the book Isaiah had a graphic description of that action: "In that day men will throw away to the rodents and bats their idols of silver and idols of gold, which they made to worship." Idolatry will be revealed for its folly and worthlessness. Idols are manufactured by people. How can those same people turn around and honor the idols as something greater than themselves? Trusting idols brings no benefits. They cannot answer prayer, they provide no help in times of need, and they definitely won't save you. If you stand before the Judge on the Last Day and turn to an idol you will be left out in the cold. Or should I say, the heat? The fires of hell await. Idols can do nothing for a person.

God is patient, but do not presume upon that patience. What idols do we construct? We may not frequent idol temples, but we have plenty of edifices dedicated to pleasure. Entertainment is not wrong, but what is most important in our existence? Power can be an idol. Our own abilities might be the object of our trust, or our wisdom as we set ourselves up as judge over God's Word. Upon finding an aspect of His teaching that they dislike, people assert, "I can't fathom a god who would want such a thing or deny me that. He wants me to be happy, doesn't he?" Yes, God does, but true happiness comes from His ways. Our flesh, tantalized by Satan, thinks delight comes from evil but really it is trouble that results, all kinds of it. God does punish evil. Look out! Even the dimmest eyes will see horrors.

II.

In the midst of the troubling scene that Isaiah described stands God in His goodness, ready to help. Follow His leading of the blind. That's us. We were by nature spiritually blind and in darkness. That's a doubly difficult situation. We were absolutely lost, with no spiritual powers. We were unable to find God or the way to Him. In fact, we had no desire to do so. We were enemies of God.

He brings us to realize our lost condition and need for a Savior. And He steps in to help. He leads us with certainty through the rubble of the destruction surrounding us. He smoothes the rough terrain, brings us on the way and illuminates the journey.

He does all that by His Word. Isaiah announced, "It pleased the Lord for the sake of his righteousness to make his law great and glorious." He acted for the sake of His righteousness. God is faithful and just. What He promises, He also fulfills.

The term "law" in the Bible does not refer only to God's rules and commandments, but in several instances includes all His teaching, which is great. Especially marvelous is the message of Jesus, His Son, the Savior whose way on the crossroads we are following in our midweek Lenten services. Christ's love was so great He was willing to die, enduring the agonies of hell, to rescue us blind, unworthy sinners. He gave us the righteousness achieved by His perfect life. The result is that I, a lost and condemned sinner, have a reservation in heaven. The glorious light of Jesus shines forth, scattering the darkness. He does not just show the path through the pitfalls and minefields of life, but He provides an express ride through it all. Sit back and enjoy the journey. Follow His leading.

I mentioned earlier my original lack of use of glasses. They were on my face only during classes. I suppose part of the reason was the inconvenience for activities or outdoors. There might have been a little vanity. Back then, kids who wore glasses were called "four eyes"—or in my case it might have

been “three eyes” since one lens was plain glass—and that would be even weirder. So I did not avail myself of the help they provided. I was satisfied with what I could see. The same happens as we lose our hearing—who enjoys hearing aids? But you miss out on so much when you can’t hear well. It is a real tragedy when we treat our spiritual lives like that. Confess your estrangement from God and come to Jesus. There is no cost to you. Believing in Jesus does not make you ugly. Styles change, and some of the eyeglasses of the past we now laugh at. It wouldn’t really matter how faith in Jesus made us look since it is so essential. Repent and receive the Good News of God’s great and glorious message. Believe it and be saved.

III.

Yeah, I already know all that, a voice inside you may be saying. I have sight and follow His leading as a faithful member of God’s church. Keep listening and realize your ongoing need. Do not be complacent and comfortable but take a close look at yourself. The Lord had some strong words for His servants. “Wake up! Open your eyes!” He called out. “Who is blind but my servant, and deaf like the messenger I send? Who is blind like the one committed to me, blind like the servant of the Lord?” He was talking about the Israelite nation. They were to be His servant and messenger, doing His will and sharing the Word of the Lord. You can’t pass on what you do not know yourself. They had fallen asleep, lulled by the continuing refrain of His goodness.

They were to be committed to Him. A covenant relationship existed with the Lord. They had vowed their faithfulness. “We will do everything the Lord has said,” they declared at Mt. Sinai. Remember how long it lasted. Moses didn’t even make it back down the mountain before the people of Israel were worshiping the golden calf.

God reminded them of their history. “You have seen many things.” There was one blessing after another. Think of the exodus from Egypt, with the crossing of the Red Sea, the manna and water that sustained them in the desert, and the Promised Land they came to. They enjoyed its harvests. They heard the word of the prophets and most of all they had the shadows or pictures of the Savior in their worship life that illustrated what God’s Promised One would do. You have seen all that, God pointed out, “but have paid no attention.” Was there too much of a good thing? The Word was proclaimed but they heard nothing. They were in worse condition than rejecters of the true God.

Does the description sound familiar? Does it cause you to blush? The prophet could be reading my log book. We are not God’s chosen nation, but we have it awfully good. We bask in blessings galore. People who have lived in foreign lands return and comment on how much we take for granted. And we complain we don’t have enough! That’s not the best part. We have the love of Jesus regularly proclaimed and readily offered in the Word. Do you read and study and hang on to the lifeline? Are you blinded by its brightness or are your eyes shut with indifference? Wake up! Repent! Believe God’s Word. Don’t be caught napping.

I like to close a sermon in a positive way, and I considered viewing these stern verses earlier. God directed this message to those who know the gospel, so the call to take a close look fits at the end. Yet we can close in a positive manner. God’s grace is still with us. He forgives all our waywardness. He shows us so today in the Lord’s Supper. Receive His pardon and rejoice. Live each day in repentance and faith, following His leading. Daily examine your faith and your response to His Word. The number of deaths and serious illnesses in our midst remind us of the limited time we may have. Shootings in places no one expects point out that you don’t have to be ill before you leave this world. So hear and believe the good news Jesus has for you. With God’s miracle of sight, see and rejoice in your Savior.