

Isaiah 6 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

A Vision of God in the Temple

6 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ²Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

⁴The pivots^[a] on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷The seraph^[b] touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” ⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!” ⁹And he said, “Go and say to this people:

‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend;
keep looking, but do not understand.’

¹⁰Make the mind of this people dull,
and stop their ears,
and shut their eyes,
so that they may not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and comprehend with their minds,
and turn and be healed.”

¹¹Then I said, “How long, O Lord?” And he said:
“Until cities lie waste
without inhabitant,

and houses without people,
and the land is utterly desolate;
¹²until the LORD sends everyone far away,
and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.
¹³Even if a tenth part remain in it,
it will be burned again,
like a terebinth or an oak
whose stump remains standing
when it is felled."^[c]
The holy seed is its stump.

John 3: 16“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

May 31, 2015

Trinity Sunday, John 3:16-17; Isaiah 6

Kerra Becker English

The dark night of the soul...

The valley of the shadow...

The pit of deep despair...

What will become of us in the darkness?

What happens to us when God turns off the lights?

God speaks through the prophet Isaiah: “Tell these people – Listen, but you won’t understand; look, but you won’t comprehend. Make them deaf and blind and stupid too. Take away their senses and destroy all that they know. Even if a tenth of it is left, burn that too. Destroy the whole forest until only a stump is left.”

After the whole heavenly angels and holiness bit, that’s the brilliant news Isaiah was called to share! I kind of want him to rescind his “Here I am” and hear him tell God to do his own dirty work.

We do not like to think of God that way – but when the darkness comes, we may start to think of God that way. God must be out to get us, and if not us specifically, then God must be punishing the whole class for the troublemaker in the back of the room.

It’s part of our good old Calvinist heritage. God is sovereign, ruler over all things. So when life gets dark, it could only be because God intentionally turned out the lights.

That's one way of looking at it - God being responsible for our misery. It's a repeated theme in scripture, and even more so in our cultural religious practices. To interpret God's actions in this way means that - when God is on our side, we're winning; therefore, when God turns away from us, we will, no doubt, experience trouble.

Then, it's up to us to figure out what to do with said darkness. Are we supposed to use it to strengthen our faith, or grow in grace, or get angry at God, or tighten up our morality, or change religions? All of these things are options that happen within the pages of scripture. People have a whole range of responses to those times when life falls along that range of unpredictable to downright tragic.

But I like what is snuck into the prophetic message Isaiah is supposed to reveal. God pronounces that dark times are coming, AND says "turn and be healed." It reminds me of a passage from the book "The Dude and the Zen Master," which is a recorded conversation between actor Jeff Bridges and his Zen teacher Bernie Glassman. Glassman describes the dis-ease in the world, things like war, and poverty, and starvation much like the diseases of the body. If you look at the parts, there are skirmishes going on all the time. White blood cells attack and kill weaker cells, and the parts are not always content within the whole. So in the darkness, when God says, "Turn and be healed," perhaps it's a little bit like our body's auto-immune response. A virus starts to attack you at the cellular level, so you get a fever, feel sick, throw up maybe, and all so that eventually your body will heal and get better. The healing process really feels a whole lot more like the getting sick process. Getting sick may or may not be God's fault given your particular perspective on any random day, but getting better physically, spiritually, emotionally is somehow tied to it as well. God desires our healing, and sometimes the healing begins with what looks like a mess.

The same holds true for this analogy of the holy seed being the stump. The burned up stump can become a place where the new seed is nurtured. Australian evangelist Christine Caine says, “Sometimes when you’re in a dark place, you think you’ve been buried, but actually you’ve been planted.” The sickness, the darkness, the burial that we experience might actually be a threshold to receiving what’s next for us. Maybe. I say maybe because that’s not always the case, and certainly in the depths, it doesn’t feel like it will ever be the case. So I proceed with caution as an observer. I can intellectually make the case that God is making all things new – but sometimes we really don’t want any part of those new things.

What assures me, truly, is that I believe deep down, that God loves the world. God created it, God sustains it, God loves it into being, and God continues to redeem and save. In my mind, that’s the whole point of the religious endeavor –God is love. Buddhism, in what little bits I understand it from recently reading Jeff Bridges’ account, seems to have a less personalized view of God, and yet still believes in the overall benevolence of the universal Spirit. God loves - on that we would agree. That we are turning toward healing even as the darkness surrounds us – that’s where to go with it.

One of the mistakes people make in quoting John 3:16 when they want to quip a personal understanding of God’s love is that they stop when verse 16 ends rather than finishing the thought that is right there in scripture. Those who are lovers of this verse sometimes use it to try to say that God loves some and not others. You know what I mean. Though it starts out “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son,” they gloss over that to the part that says, “so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” It becomes a way of saying, some have it, some don’t. God loves me – but not you. That’s a significant mis-read of the text, for it goes on to say, “Indeed,” which is one of my favorite transition words by the way. INDEED, God did not send the son into

the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” The bookends of this passage are GOD LOVED THE WORLD, get it, THE WORLD, Silly. This leaves us no room to interpret either our success or our suffering in that peculiarly personal kind of way that Christians somehow try to do. It has been, is now, and always will be about the entire enterprise we call humanity. Observing how another tradition, like Buddhism, handles the questions of suffering, may give us a little insight on the quirks of our own observations.

It’s still not easy to know what to say when someone we love is experiencing darkness, sickness, or the kind of life circumstances that leave them hurting and in pain. Someone I care about has been going through serious medical tests this week, and as I sometimes do, I gave her words of scripture and offered my counsel to quit reading “Christian self-help type” blogs on the Internet. The words I gave her were from Psalm 69, The Message translation. Verse 29 in that rendition is one of my favorites. It says, “I’m hurting and in pain. Give me space for healing, and mountain air.” We cannot step in and heal one another’s wounds, but we can turn them toward the healing power of God, and pray for space, and pray for mountain air, or the ocean breeze, or the smell of the honeysuckle to offer them a bit of solace and hope. It may be all we have – and I dare say that it’s enough.

Knowing God’s love really is enough to get us through so many of life’s unpleasant changes. I do appreciate that the long-view stories of the Christian tradition understand that love to be both personal AND universal. To me, that helps. It may be trying to mindfully hold on to a paradox, but it really does help in practical life and application to understand that God loves both the parts and the whole, because when the parts suffer, so does the whole. And the reverse is true as well when the parts grow, the whole does too. The forest can regenerate after a fire, the body’s immune system

can be strengthened by fighting disease. Turn and be healed. I pray for you to have that space and breathe the coolness of that air. Amen.