

“The Ministry of Vision”

Today’s lesson from Isaiah is a wonderful passage! To me, it seems like chapter six ought to be chapter one, because it is an autobiographical record of Isaiah’s vision that impacted his whole ministry, as well as shaped his theology. Judging by the number of books and articles that are written on Isaiah 6, it is a vision that has gotten the attention of many authors. Comments upon its power, clarity, literary excellence, and importance as a religious document can be multiplied on every hand. In Isaiah’s vision, he sees the glory and the holiness of God, surrounded by strange inhuman six-winged creatures called Seraphs. This vision, this experience, produces a strong impression on Isaiah to the point that it is always fresh in his mind. Consequently, the prophet Isaiah is conscious that he is living and working in the presence of the holy God, who is surrounded by glory, splendor, and majesty, high and lifted up. Likely this vision was seen at the temple in an environment of worship.

On the wall of a church in England there is a sign that reads: *A vision without a task is but a dream; a task without a vision is drudgery; a vision and a task are the hope of the world.* We know of the prophet Isaiah because he linked his vision to his work. He not only saw the moral decay of his nation, but he became God’s messenger. A true prophet never forces or conjures up a vision. A true prophet is the recipient of truth from God and is called by God to speak that truth on God’s behalf. That truth may first come to the individual as God opens his or her eyes and they see their true self! In Isaiah’s case, he sees the holiness of God, and upon seeing, such a vision stands him in judgment for his sins. During Isaiah’s time, most sins or uncleanness were related to rituals, such as not keeping the laws of cooking and eating proper food; not doing things a certain way at worship. But for Isaiah, holiness is an ethical matter, and uncleanness is not ritual uncleanness, like that of various forbidden meats, but moral uncleanness.

The sin for which the prophet Isaiah is forgiven is his involvement with and contamination by an unclean people, which the scriptures define as those who are arrogant, decadent, dishonest, greedy, drunkards and the like --- not people who had either accidentally or deliberately offered the wrong sacrifice or missed worship. Also, Isaiah’s vision changed him as a person, changed how he viewed God, how he related to God, and how the nation of Israel saw themselves in relationship to God. This is a significant point for Christ’s Church today. Isaiah announced a new criterion for the self-examination of Israel. Moral cleanness now means ethical cleanness not ritual cleanness. The issues most often raised today are ones focused on morals and values and ethics ... particularly in the today’s business and political world where greed and arrogance seems to be the standard of conduct. We need to listen closely to Isaiah, who I believe is speaking a prophetic message to our nation, our times, and our dilemmas.

Whether we acknowledge it or not, we all live by vision. Vision is that image formed within our mind that is carved out of our dreams and hopes and deepest yearnings. Vision is important because what we envision has the power to shape our expectations and daily actions and to sustain us when things are not going well. The great individuals of the Bible had visions, and their greatness seemed proportional to their vividness of their visions, especially prophets, who envisioned their messages from God. Habakkuk, for instance, said: *Then the Lord answered me and said: ‘Write the vision; make it plain upon tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. It seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay’* (Hab. 2:2-3). Such a sureness of vision was Isaiah’s, too. Isaiah envisioned God. “How” Isaiah saw God is irrelevant -- whether it was ecstatic or mystical or “actual” --- has no bearing upon the reality of the event for Isaiah’s ministry. What matters is that he saw something divine in such a way as to change him ... to shape him for the rest of his life.

Perhaps it is rare to experience such a vision, but some type of vision is vital to inspired living. Our visions may not be awesome; we may not feel the raw edge of terror, as did Isaiah. But there may be reserved for each of us a place of holy ground where we may be humbled, purged and empowered to ask: “Will I do?” And if so, to be bold enough to say, “Here am I; send me!” Would we dare to pray like that, offering ourselves to God for a vision and a mission? Would we be so bold as to ask God to show us the way in our life, in our church, in this world --- show us the work we would do in His Name? Faith and vision are closely related, as is trust and task. Instead of moaning and groaning about how bad our life is, it would be better if we would pray to God to show us the way and to take our hand.

There is a well-known, oft-told story about the great Renaissance artist Michelangelo, a famous statue, and a boy named Giovanni. Every day after school Giovanni would rush to Michelangelo’s studio to watch the famous sculptor chip away at a fourteen-foot high block of marble. Week after week, the boy came and watched, as the magnificent form of David began to take shape. Finally, it was done. The boy was absolutely amazed by the transformation of a piece of stone

into the beautiful statue of David, and in all innocence, he asked Michelangelo, "How did you know he was in there?" Michelangelo knew because he had a vision of what he could create, if he was willing to dedicate himself to it, if he was willing to take risks, and if he was willing to work hard and long enough until his vision was a reality.

One author tells of an interesting experience that taught him to envision quality each day of life. While walking through the country one day, he stopped to admire a beautiful garden surrounded by a white fence. As he stood there, a little old lady stopped by his side. After he greeted her, she came closer and asked if he was enjoying the flowers. When he said that he was, she launched upon a detailed description of the harmony of the colors and shapes of each and every type of flower in the garden. When she concluded her vivid description she looked up at him, and he noticed that she was blind. He asked her how she was able to describe the vast array of colors to such perfection, inasmuch as she could not see. The old woman answered that when she was able to see, she learned to look at the beauties of nature as if she would never see them again. Her ancient vision carried her through life, just as Isaiah was sustained through his life of ministry by the never-to-be-forgotten vision of the holy.

As people of faith, we need to see each day as if it is the total span of our life. We need to learn how to let go of those things that blind us to life; that hurry us along without thought or sight of our surroundings. We need to learn to not take this day or any day for granted. It is important to envision our life in the grand scheme of things. I know it is difficult to do these things, because we stand-alone today at the top of a vast scientific edifice in our knowledge of the universe. But the disturbing thing, we discover, is that it may belong to no one, and that no one is in charge. The universe is like a ghost town; no one lives there. One big problem we have is that we can no longer envision a Creator. We see only the creation, not the Creator.

And there in lies our grave danger, as the author of Deuteronomy writes: *Beware lest you lift up your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and stars, all the host of heaven, you will be drawn away and worship them and serve them, things which the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole of heaven.* In other words, beware of making a god out of yourself ... beware of narrowing and limiting your vision ... beware of truly not listening. God comes to people of faith. The question is, "Are you prepared or willing to be a recipient of God's vision for our life? Do you have the courage to see beyond your own hands to the hand of God at work in our life?"

Another authors writes, "It has been said that in the country of the blind the one-eyed man is king." Also, it has been said that without vision the people perish. Although I would not be so rash as to say that our country in recent times has been the country of the blind, I am aware that for the past two or three decades there is a certain blindness ... arrogance ... in our national vision. Says one writer: *We have been in an interlude of functionary rather than visionary leadership, primarily in government, but also in all those places of national life where functionalism has supplanted vision and even common sense as a mark of what it means to lead. National vision, for example, is the vision of the bottom line and an almost blind belief in a system that is assumed to make the bottom line profitable. Such a small number of visions have been measured in the decline of idealism where we have descended from 'ask not what your country can do for you, but ask what you can do for your country,' ... to ... 'ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for yourself,' ... to ... 'I want a country where everyone can be rich.'*

Indeed, where have all the dreamers gone? The Church of Jesus Christ for centuries has produced great music and great art; has written great books; has proclaimed great messages. The Church's power and influence has come from the Spirit of God and empowered people to have visions about the world; visualizing how God would have the world be. The Word of God this day calls to each of us to make ourselves available to God's spirit; asks each of us to pray to God for a vision of our life in the total context of God's purpose for the world. We need to dream great dreams. We need to see beyond that which is only at arm's length to what God would have us do with our lives.

As a church, we need to pray always for a vivid, vital vision about who we are as Christ's people. We exist as a church because God wills it. And therefore, we must come to know God's will in order to address the future. Let us not pray in fear but pray in hope! Let us not act in doubt or skepticism but in faith. Let us not act with closed minds but with minds that seek visions. If we do so, God will come and send us ... if we are willing to have Him come and send us. It is important for your life, and for the life of this church, and for the life of the community in which you live that you be willing to humbly stand before God and say as Isaiah said: "Here am I! Send me!"