

“I Will Lead the Blind”

In the name of him who opens the eyes of the blind, dear friends in Christ: Back when this church year began, I said that this time through the lectionary I was going to address some of the biblical texts that I've avoided in the past for various reasons. Some I decided not to preach because they're so brief and simple that I thought, "How am I going to get a sermon out of this?" Others I've left alone because after reading them I'd scratch my head and wonder, "What?" Today's reading from Isaiah is one of those. But have no fear: after much study and prayerful consideration, my eyes have been opened. So hold on, here we go.

To understand this text (or any other in the book of Isaiah) you have to back up and see the greater context of what the prophet is talking about. So let's start there. Isaiah does his writing at the time of the divided kingdom in the middle of the 8th century BC. You've got Israel in the north, which consists of ten of the original tribes. Its capital is the city of Samaria. From a spiritual point of view, its kings have been nothing but losers who led the people astray, so the history of the nation as a whole is one of unfaithfulness to the Lord. Lots of the citizens are outright pagans who turned their back on the Lord in favor of the Canaanite gods and goddesses. And the vast majority of the others freely mix pagan idolatry with the worship of the Lord. There are only a tiny handful of folks who remain genuinely faithful to the God of Israel.

The nation of Judah is in the south. Its capital is Jerusalem. The kings of the line of David rule here. Some have been very faithful to the Lord; others not so much. A few have been real stinkers. Overall, the people here have a better track record of faithfulness to the one true God; but they've got their share of idol worshippers and pagan religion mixers too.

Okay, Isaiah does his prophesying in Judah. He's been saying that on account of the northern kingdom's faithlessness, the Lord is going to destroy it. He's going to have the Assyrians invade and take over. The people of Israel will be scattered and destroyed. The reason for this is twofold. First, because God's patience eventually comes to an end. They've rejected the warnings of the prophets sent to them time and again. Now comes judgment. But the second reason is for Judah's sake. It's an object lesson. They are to see what happens to their northern neighbors and take it as a warning. If you don't shape up and renounce your idolatry, the same thing is going to happen to you.

Ah, but the Lord has told Isaiah that this lesson isn't going to stick. Sure enough, the destruction of the northern kingdom will come. And when it happens Judah will watch and be horrified. They'll even narrowly escape a similar fate. When it looks like the Assyrian army is going to get them too, the Lord will intervene, give them a bloody nose, and send them packing. Judah will be saved. They'll thank the Lord profusely. And then not too long later, they'll forget him. In fact, they'll become even more faithless and idolatrous than Israel ever was. So, looking into the future, Isaiah tells of a time when Judah too will be destroyed. Many of its people will be taken into exile and resettled in a foreign land. The main reason will be their turning from the Lord to worship idols.

And one of the big themes of Isaiah's preaching is that people become what they worship. Idols can't see. They're blind. Idols can't hear. They're deaf. And in a spiritual sense those who worship idols also become blind and deaf. Though they look with their eyes at the world and what goes on in it, they can't see or understand what God is doing. Though they

might listen to what God is saying through his Word, they are deaf to its meaning. They can't really hear it at all.

All right, one more piece to explain the backdrop of today's text. Yes, the prophet says, Israel will be destroyed, never to rise again. And yes, in the future, Judah will also be destroyed. It too will look like it is gone forever. But. But the Lord is going to bring back a remnant of Judah. He's going to return some of those who were captured and taken into exile. After what seems an impossibly long time, he'll suddenly step forward, take his people, and resettle them in their inheritance once again. He'll reestablish (one might even say "resurrect") the nation of Judah.

That's what Isaiah is talking about in the section we heard this morning: the Lord bringing the exiles back from their captivity. He says, "For a long time I held my peace, I restrained myself; but now I'm going to shriek like a woman in the throes of childbirth." That seems a rather strange way for the Lord to talk about himself, like a woman in labor. It's actually one of two parallel descriptions he gives. If you back up to the verse that comes right before today's text it says this: "The Lord goes out like a mighty man, like a man of war he stirs up his zeal; he cries out, he shouts aloud, he shows himself mighty against his foes."

They are two complimentary pictures. What they share in common is this: the mighty warrior going into battle and the woman going in to labor both go through a long time of relative inactivity before their intense burst of action. In the army it's always hurry up and wait. We drill, we march, we camp; everything's pretty mundane compared to the wild fury of battle. Likewise a woman who's expecting a child, her life goes on pretty much the same as usual. She does all the regular things until she goes into labor; and then the battle's on.

Lord is saying that's how it's going to be. It will look like I'm not doing anything. The people in exile will think I've forgotten them. They won't be anticipating anything from me. And then like a lightning strike, ka-boom! I'll take action: laying waste to mountains, scorching landscapes, and running rivers dry. This is the poetic language of judgment. He's not talking about destroying the earth; he's talking about destroying the empire that took the people captive. Historically, we know he's talking about the Babylonian Empire that arose a century or so after Isaiah's time. This was the one that destroyed Judah and took some of her people into exile. In its heyday it was a genuine superpower. People imagined that it would last forever. But it didn't. Like all one time world powers, this one grew fat and lazy from its success. They were toppled and destroyed by their leaner, meaner neighbors, the Persians. It was the first king of the Persian Empire, a man named Cyrus, who set the exiles free and told them they could return to the land of Judah and rebuild their nation.

And so it is that the Lord says, "I will lead the blind in a way that they do not know, in paths that they have not known, I will guide them." He means the exiles. They'll be like blind people. And the way blind people cope with the world is to always follow familiar, well worn paths. They know how many steps it is from the kitchen to the bathroom. They carefully arrange their closets so they can find what they're looking for. True story: once when I was kid, I was visiting a friend's house. We're sitting on the sofa in the living room. At one point he calls to their dog, a little toy poodle. Instantly you hear the thing's nails clicking across the kitchen floor a couple of rooms away. It starts yapping. It comes through the door at breakneck speed, weaves its way through the maze of furniture legs in the dining room, turns a few corners, cuts under an end table on the other side of the room, narrowly dodges an ottoman, comes under the coffee table in front of us, and bounds happily into the guy's lap. He pets the silly thing for a bit, and after a while it gets bored and trots back to its bed near the back door. My friend says, "Do you believe it? That dog is totally blind." I said, "No way: I saw how it came in here. It can

see exactly where it's going." He said, "Nope. It's blind. Can't see a thing. Watch this." He pulls the coffee table back toward the sofa about six inches. Then he calls the dog again. Same thing: it follows the exact course it did before and just as fast. But this time when it comes up from under the coffee table—Whap! Yiiipe!

Kids, don't try this at home. It was a cruel thing to do, especially to a beloved family pet; but it illustrates the point: when it comes to spiritual matters, people think they can see. And to any observer, they give every evidence of being able to see – as long as they're staying in the comfort and security of their familiar patterns and places. But if you rearrange the furniture or take them to a place they don't know, they're lost. What's more, they know they're lost. And then they know that they need someone who can see to guide them.

The exiles in captivity in Babylon thought they'd never be able to go home. In fact, most of them were taken as hostages about a decade before Judah was destroyed. As long as Judah was still there, there was hope. But once their homeland ceased to exist, there was no home to return to. So they got used to being in Babylon. And the conventional spiritual wisdom at the time was that they had been taken into captivity in the first place because they were somehow worse and less faithful than the people who were left behind. Why else would the Lord put us here so far from home? Those lucky stiffies who got to stay in Judah are the Lord's favorites. Turns out that was exactly backwards. The ones who were taken into exile were those the Lord determined to save for the sake of the Gospel. Those who were left behind in Judah they so envied were the ones the Lord slated for judgment because they refused to repent and turn from their idolatry.

When Babylon fell and the exiles were allowed to return, they were thinking, "We didn't see this coming." And the Lord was saying, "That's because you thought you could see what I was doing. But you were wrong. You're blind. Let me lead you now. I'll take you home."

Two weeks ago in the Gospel reading, we heard the account of a Pharisee named Nicodemus coming to talk with Jesus. The man was a highly respected religious scholar. He and everyone else believed that when it came to God's Word, he could see perfectly. In truth, he was an absolute legalist. He thought the path to salvation was by keeping the Law of God. So what he trusted in was himself and in his ability to keep the Law. And a person's god – or his idol – is whatever he trusts in. So Nicodemus was blind and didn't know it. But this Jesus fellow didn't fit his familiar pattern. He did great miracles, proving he was from God; but he was totally opposed to the Pharisees and their way of thinking. He was the piece of furniture that was out of place that Nicodemus kept tripping over. He wanted to find a place in his spiritual understanding for Jesus to be where he wouldn't be a problem; but Jesus refused to be moved to fit his system. Instead, with his words he kept tripping Nicodemus over and over again. Before he could lead Nicodemus to the light, Jesus had to prove to him that he was blind.

Last week we heard the story of Jesus meeting a Samaritan woman at a well. She too was spiritually blind. Her idols were the men she kept pursuing and marrying. She thought that if she could just find the right one, her life would be happy, fulfilling, and most of all secure. But no mere man can provide what she was looking for. Only the true God can do that. The result was that she'd been through five husbands and was shacking up with number six. To lead her to see the truth, Jesus first had to show her how she was blindly groping to find contentment and security in false gods. Only then could she see that Jesus was the true God who could give her eternal peace and security.

In today's Gospel, it's the disciples who imagine they can see spiritually. They come across a man blind from birth, and they wonder, "Who is God punishing here?" Did his parents

commit some horrible crime, so that the Lord prevented their son from seeing? Or is he punishing this man for some evil he did even before he was born? Neither answer is very satisfying. If it was the parents, why take it out on the poor kid? That's not fair. On the other hand, what could this guy have done while still in the womb that was so despicable that the Lord gave him such a severe sentence? It's not like he could sneak out of there and commit a robbery or a murder and then return to his hideout. So the punishment seems undeservedly harsh for any sin a prenatal infant might be guilty of. The answer really trips them up either way; but one thing they know for sure: the man's blindness must be because somebody sinned and God is getting even. Everyone knows that's the way God works.

Except he doesn't. Jesus has to tell the disciples that they are the ones who don't see. They think they see what God is doing; but they don't. The man's blindness isn't about punishing anyone. He was born blind so that the works of God might be displayed in him. And not just his healing by Jesus, which clearly was a work of God displayed in him. But God displayed other works in him. In every act of kindness, compassion, and charity the man received, the work of God was shown. When people took him to this place or that, the Lord showed what he was doing for the whole nation: leading the blind. But to be led to the truth, first you have to know you're blind.

Has anyone seen the film *The Scent of a Woman*? In it Al Pacino plays a nasty curmudgeon of an ex-Army Colonel who was blinded in a training accident. His regular caretakers are taking a short vacation, so they hire a college student to look after him for a couple days. The student is new at this, so first time they step out for a walk the kid takes the colonel's arm to guide him. The colonel slaps his hand away violently, and shouts, "Are you blind?!" The kid says, "No, of course not." The colonel says, "Then why are you grabbing me? I'm the one who's blind. I take hold of you."

Dear friends, we are blind. We were born in utter spiritual darkness, our hearts turned from away the Lord. Our tendency is always to go in that direction: away from the Lord and his truth. And we have all kinds of idols: work, money, intelligence, education, relationships, honor, glory, fame, property and possessions – all the stuff we think will make us happy and secure – the stuff we trust in. And we think we know where we're going. We think what we do is right. We're constantly trying to justify ourselves in the sight of God. And we look around at what happens in the world and we think we know what God is doing. And Jesus won't let us do it. He keeps moving the coffee table. He has to show us that we're blind just like our idols, because he won't grab us. We're the ones who are blind. He wants us to take hold of him.

Because then he can lead us, lead us out of the darkness, lead us by his Word of truth, lead us to receive his blood bought forgiveness, lead us to confess his holy name, lead us to do his Father's will, lead us to learn to love one another, and lead us to the eternal Promised Land. We don't have to pretend to see everything. We have only to hold onto him. He will lead the blind. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!