

Prophetic Eyes

Isaiah 65

I bring you greetings from the University of Evansville and our President Tom Kazee; the Indiana Conference of the United Methodist Church and Bishop Michael Coyner; and on behalf of my husband who was sitting below me, which I quite like, Aldersgate United Methodist Church, in Evansville, where Mitchell serves as the Senior Minister. We are more than delighted; we are humbled and grateful to serve in the liturgy this morning.

I am sure I speak for Mitch, too, when I say we give thanks for Leslie and Margaret and their work here at the historic Wesley's Chapel. World Methodism is better because of the Griffiths. We are honored to call them friends. I'm sure you know, the University of Evansville awarded Lord Griffiths with an honorary degree last month, the *Doctor of Humane Letters*, which means the alumni mailing list "prestige factor" rose about 2 notches with Lord Griffiths on the mailing list. Leslie preached a timely and inspiring Baccalaureate address in Neu Chapel on May 7 and the requests for copies continue to stream in to the office.

We are also thankful for our friendship with Katherine Baxter and Peter Grundy, who because of Leslie have become our good friends. Katherine also preached in Neu Chapel last fall when she was invited to serve as the University's "Artist in Residence." She did a remarkable job in the Chapel and in the Gallery.

The University of Evansville is pleased to have this relationship with Wesley's Chapel and we trust the feeling is mutual.

If you came to Wesley's Chapel this morning expecting to hear a British Lord preach, well, sorry. By now, the disappointment has sunk in, but look on the bright side -- I've saved you all a trip to Evansville, Indiana to hear an American Methodist University Chaplain preach. So, you're welcome.

Several years ago, a group of us were in Israel for a 12-day study tour. Our itinerary included historic Jericho, a city thought to be one of the oldest in the world. It was there we would see the Sycamore tree marked as the one Zacchaeus climbed to get a better look at Jesus, the spring of Elisha... And standing just a few meters away from the Mount of Temptation Gift Shop, we would gaze upon the mountainous region where Satan made his best effort to lure Jesus into an alternative mission.

Our small group took a few moments to be silent -- in that desert-ridden valley -- and looking upon the mountainside, we were pleased to imagine the daily prayers taking place within the cloisters of the Greek Monastery that rested there. Many of us thought how appropriate it was to have a sacred place of prayer at the Mount of Temptation.

And then, in the quiet, solitude of that moment, we thought we heard thunder rumbling in the distant skies, which didn't make sense because there were blue skies all around us. But the rumble became a roar, which turned into what seemed like a sonic boom! And we began to wonder if the sky was falling, if the world was crumbling, if we would live to tell about it!

Our first inclination was to take cover, but we also found ourselves believing that if our lives were about to end, we might as well watch. And just then, four F-16 fighter jets did what seemed like a below-the-flight-deck fly-over, right there in the Holy Land, at the Mount of Temptation.

It was a startling jolt back to reality because we were, after all, in the West Bank. What if all HELL breaks loose? Or worse? Has anyone heard anything from CNN? MSNBC? Should we pack our bags and go home?!?! And just like that, fear had stolen our moment. The demons that Jesus encountered during those 40-days had encroached on our air space. They had us believing that fear should direct our next move. But you see, demons are in the business of fear. Demons are in the business of immobilizing us with strongholds of darkness. Demons bid us, "Forget the Prophetic Eyes of Isaiah. Nothing new here. Death and decay win the day! Everything wears down eventually and you will, too. Be afraid. Be very afraid." And we were, afraid. At the foot of the Mount of Temptation, Satan bid us to believe an alternative narrative – contrary to the Gospel – and our imprisoned spirits did just that.

Isaiah calls us to remember, again. Be glad and rejoice forever!! Never again will they harm or destroy on my holy mountain! Isaiah's eyes give us hope – provide a vision -- all things made new! According to Isaiah, God isn't so much concerned with patching up the old. God's agenda is about creating all things NEW! When we have the courage to view the world with the prophetic eyes of Isaiah we see God's order of things.

No more tears?

No more war?

Eden re-birthed?

Sounds like *amazing love. How can it be?*¹

What's the old saying? If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is?

Baylor University, the largest Southern Baptist University in the U.S., had at one time an underground newspaper, which was 100% satire, much to the dismay of the Administration.. One week a few years ago, the headlines read:

“BRIDE OF CHRIST SUE FOR DIVORCE”

The article explained that the Bride of Christ (Church) was suing her husband, Jesus, for divorce because, "...he said he would be right back, but that was over 2000 years ago, and most people have decided it was time to get on with their lives.”

Ted Turner, multi-billionaire, a few years back made a statement for which he became notorious. Turner said he disliked Christianity because it was a “religion of losers.”

¹ A reference to the exhilarating hymn written by Charles Wesley, *And Can It Be*.

Well, the North-American church can't even coax its own members to attend worship. We offer them donut shops and coffee shops and yoga classes to get them in the doors. We beg them, "Please come to our church!" Membership decline is real. Losers.

Look at the headlines. Losers

Turn on the BBC, CNN. Have you heard about the fiasco that is the American presidential race? ISIS is infiltrating our neighborhoods, interfering with our holidays, insinuating into our lives. Cancer refuses to be cured. And now there's ZIKA Virus!

And how many prayers have gone up asking, even begging God for a fix? How many times have we prayed, "Thy Kingdom come... Peace on Earth, goodwill... blah, blah, blah...."? It certainly doesn't feel as though we are "winning."

Yet, Isaiah 65 is supposed to be our op-ed, which stands next to the world's narrative that wants to build walls of fear, a narrative that demonizes whole groups of people, a narrative that prefers division instead of collaboration. Isaiah 65 proclaims the amazing love of a God who makes good on promises. Never again! Not on my mountain!

Perhaps you remember the story of Don Quixote, the man of La Mancha, who decides to revive chivalry, undo wrongs, and bring justice to the world. But his quest for honor was met with resistance, even ridicule. People went so far as to devise schemes to embarrass, humiliate him. The problem? No one was doing that anymore. The world had changed. The image he chose to be, the image of a knight, the image of courage, was no longer popular. He wanted to be the defender of noble causes –except -- no one was doing that anymore. He was accused of being a mad man because he had a vision that no one else could see. But Don Quixote's response was:

"Madness is to see life as it is, NOT as it is supposed to be."

Isn't that the essence of our faith? Isn't our faith supposed to be based on how things are supposed to be? Is that why we Christians look like losers to Ted Turner? Is that why the world looks at us and says, "Geez, get on with your life. He's not coming back! Yet, we must ask ourselves: Did Jesus call us to fit in? Did Jesus call us to do what was popular? How was it Flannery O'Connor paraphrased the gospel? "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you ODD!"

Maybe the world could use a few more Don Quixote-types who are idealistic, who hold out for the irrational, who believe in the absurd, who dream dreams, and see visions when no one else will or can. If there is going to be something to strive for, someone is going to HAVE to proclaim *that* for which we strive!

Oliver Saks (neurologist), in his book: *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*, discusses two patients with neurological issues: William Thompson and a man simply known as Jimmy.² William Thompson cannot construct a narrative memory so he makes them up. Today he is a grocer; the next day he is a physician; one day he is a minister (the Rev. William Thompson).

² Tom Long, American homiletician and biblical scholar, told this story during his sermon at one of the annual Festivals of Homiletics. My notes are not dated, but he deserves the credit for this brilliant story.

If you would visit him on a regular basis, you too, would change identities. Today you are a butcher. The next day, you are a surgeon. And one day, you are an attendant at a gas station. Deprived of an interior narrative - he engages in narrative frenzy. He simply creates his own, one after another.

Jimmy, on the other hand, does not have the capacity to construct any kind narrative memory. Dr. Saks was examining both Mr. Thompson and Jimmy and one day Saks asked the nuns who were taking care of Jimmy, “Do you think he’s lost his soul?” They became angry and said “No!” Watch him in Worship. Saks followed him into the sanctuary for the Eucharistic service (Holy Communion). He was astonished to see the symptoms of Jimmy’s disease disappear as he participated in a narrative he could not create, but was given. He could repeat the words of the liturgy. He could move through the actions of the drama of the Eucharist. He had been given a narrative, not of his own making, but one which gave him an identity.

When our souls are imprisoned, fast-bound by nature’s night – we worship. In the liturgy of Holy Communion we are reminded again of Isaiah’s vision. We are placing ourselves in the context of a narrative that we did not create. And yet, it is the narrative out of which, we are invited to live. It’s the story of plenty. It’s the story of kingdom parties. It’s the story of inclusion. The story of all things new! It’s the grace narrative. And it sounds like chains falling off!! When we know the future, it dethrones the demons of fear. The Demons invite us to live in fear. But the eyes of a prophet see the vision of all things new! The eyes of a prophet can see what Charles Wesley wrote about in his great hymn.

*No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in Him, is mine!
Alive in Him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness Divine,
Bold I approach the eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.
Bold I approach the eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.³*

³ Wesley, Charles. *And Can It Be*. 1738.