

Scripture:

Isaiah 6:1-8

John 3:1-17

“Seeing things differently...”

Anybody remember the show ----- “Wide World of Sports” ---- or more specifically “ABC’s Wide World of Sports” ----- I remember watching it with my dad on Saturday afternoons in the basement of our home as a teenager.

For those who remember --- and watched ---- you may recall the opening words as the music played ---- “Wide World of Sports --- spanning the globe to give you the constant variety of sports ---- the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat.”

And just as the words the thrill of victory were said --- there would be images of the latest big sports event --- the Superbowl winner ---- Nascar Sprint Cup champion --- the latest Olympic gold medalist --- and so on.

And similarly when the words ----- “agony of defeat” --- were said there would be images of tragic losses ---- crashes ----- disappointments.

And the very first image in the agony of defeat was one Vinko Bogataj ---- a Yugoslavian Ski Jumper crashing dramatically without ever having even left the ramp of the ski jump.

The agony of defeat ----- or so it seemed ---- tragic crash before even getting off the ramp --- unfortunate ---- or at least --- so it seemed.

And it seemed to be tragic --- and agonizing --- a brutal defeat ---- but in truth something else was happening.

Because far from a tragic --- “agony of defeat” kind of moment ----- what actually happened was that Vinko realized he had to make a significant adjustment to avoid a tragic ending --- but he simply wasn’t able to in time to complete the jump and instead crashed prematurely as he tried to adjust -- ----- perhaps saving his life in the end.

This was his 3rd jump of the day and Vinko quickly realized that the jump surface had become too fast --- and mid way down the ramp he realized that if he completed the jump he would have landed on the level ground instead of on the downward slope which would have spelled certain disaster --- and likely even killed him.

And so to avoid such a tragedy he tried to lower his centre of gravity to shorten his jump length but in the process of this adjustment he ended up slipping of the ramp and crash landing.

And in the end he ended up with just a headache.

No broken bones --- no torn ligaments --- slipped discs ---- no concussion even ---- if they even thought about them back then ----- and instead just a head ache.

Hardly a defeat if you stop to think about it.

Instead it was more about making an adjustment that may have saved his life --- and that of many others.

After Vinko shared his story that day on the stretcher on the hillside the ramp was adjusted and slowed down ----- saving others from having to make similar kinds of adjustments that he felt he had to make in order to avoid landing dangerously on the flat ground instead of safely on the sloping hill.

The point to the story of Vinko Bogataj ----- was that he came to a critical moment ---- and in that moment he saw things differently --- and he had to make a major change in order to avoid a fatal crash landing in the end.

And in a way this is exactly what happens to Isaiah in our Old testament reading --- and Nicodemus in our New Testament reading today.

In John's gospel Nicodemus comes to Jesus realizing that he has to make some significant changes in his life --- in order to avoid a fatal crash.

Nicodemus knows that unless he changes his trajectory in life --- and makes some significant adjustments ----- things are going to end badly for him ----- he suddenly sees things differently and so he comes to Christ asking questions and seeking counsel.

Like the Yugoslavian ski jumper who on a hillside in 1970 realized he had to make some significant changes in hopes of staying alive ---- so it is for Nicodemus.

For Vinko Bogataj the changing conditions were snowfall and repeated use of the jump ramp by too many competitors in too quick succession.

For Nicodemus the changing conditions are the light and truth of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

And so in light of Christ ---- Nicodemus quickly realizes that he has to change in order to avoid a fatal ending --- damnation.

The same can be said of Isaiah as well --- he has an experience where he too sees things differently.

Isaiah shows up at the temple --- it's just another usual day --- a visit to the temple to worship God --- but then conditions change --- something new and unexpected happens and he has to make some significant adjustments to his life.

God came to Isaiah in the temple that day and nothing would ever be the same again.

As verse 9 indicates --- Isaiah is called to speak to the people on God's behalf --- a prophetic voice.

So Isaiah enters the Temple --- the very same temple he had many --- many times before ---- only this day ---- God comes in a special and heightened way.

Isaiah describes his visit to the temple this way ---- beginning at verse 1 from chapter 6 ---- "I saw the Lord high and exalted --- seated on a throne --- and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim --- each had six wings --- with two wings they covered their faces ---- with two they covered their feet --- and with two they were flying."

Two inanimate ornate --- sculpted out seraphim's --- way up in the rafters ---
 ---- in the distant architecture of the temple ----- suddenly come to life ---
 "covering their faces ----- covering their feet ----- and flying away."

Isaiah had no doubt glanced up at these seraphim many times before ---
 gazing at them as the Torah was read --- or the Rabbi taught --- or a Psalm
 was sung --- a prayer lead ----- and so on.

But suddenly on this day these seraphim come alive and are dancing in the
 light and love of the Holy Spirit.

And not only this -- but they speak as well.

Verse 3 ---- "And they were calling to one another ----
 "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty
 the whole earth is full of his glory."

And as if this isn't enough --- then there's verse 4 -----
 "At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the
 temple was filled with smoke."

And now finally Isaiah responds.

The seraphims are dancing and calling out to each other ---- the thresholds
 are shaking and the temple is filled with the hem of God's robe and also
 smoke --- and finally Isaiah responds.

Finally he responds and adjusts to what is happening around him.

He quickly realizes that things are different on this day and so he changes
 his path and says ----- verse 5 ---- "Woe to me --- I am ruined! For I am a
 man of unclean lips --- and I live among a people of unclean lips --- and my
 eyes have seen the King ---- the Lord Almighty."

Isaiah suddenly saw things differently --- and knew he had to change ---- just
 as Nicodemus did.

So it is for us ---- in light of Christ.

And so it is for us ----- in light of the new directions and new conditions that we find ourselves in ---- the truth of Christ --- and the Holy Spirit of God forever working in the world --- including within us.

Some people ---- many --- most even ----- saw what happened to Vinko Bogataj that day on the hillside in Oberstdorf Germany in 1970 and thought of it as an --- “agony of defeat” ---- kind of moment ----- him slipping of the jump ramp at the very last minute and crashing instead of ever even entering into the jump.

But in truth it may have saved his life --- it may have been the very best decision of his life --- a “thrill of victory” moment ----- instead of an agony of defeat one.

For many ---- that Nicodemus --- a Pharisee ---- a member of the Jewish ruling council ---- an educated and well respected man --- would ever be daring and foolish enough to go to one renegade --- outlaw ---- disturber of the peace preacher like Jesus of Nazareth ----- was unthinkable --- an “agony of defeat” ---- type of moment.

But Nicodemus sees things differently and makes the necessary adjustments in his life.

In order to escape a fatal --- life ending crash landing at the end --- Nicodemus makes a necessary adjustment --- he goes to Christ.

In chapter 6 of his prophecy --- Isaiah starts off by saying ----- “In the year that King Uzziah died...” ---- and then curiously he never mentions the King again.

New needs come to life for him --- new priorities come to light.

His encounter with God through worship changes everything.

He walks into the Temple thinking about what year it is --- what has just happened --- the King has died ---- and he leaves as one commissioned by God to teach and lead the people.

And clearly Isaiah had no plans of this when he first entered the Temple that day because he expresses his reluctance saying ---- “Woe to me --- I am

ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips --- and I live among a people of unclean lips.”

But again things change --- conditions are altered ---- forcing Isaiah to change as well ----- the seraphim take a live coal and touch his lips ----- “taking away his guilt and atoning for his sin” ---- as verse 7 say.

The gospel truth today is all about seeing things differently.

Seeing things differently and then changing ---- making the necessary adjustments.

Vinko Bogataj --- saw things differently as he was about to enter onto the jump ramp for the third time that day --- and altered his path at last second in order to avoid what to him was a sure and certain life threatening crash --- the track was too fast --- so he crashed himself out early probably saving his life.

Nicodemus saw things differently --- he came to realize that without consulting Christ he would be erring as a leader in the community --- he came to realize that something different was happening in the life and ministry of this Jesus of Nazareth who was going about teaching and healing and performing miracles in God’s name.

Isaiah saw things differently and soon realized that something different was happening at the temple that day --- that God was calling him in a new direction --- and that he had to make the necessary changes and adjustment in order to avoid catastrophe --- and in order to honour God and be faithful to His ways.

We too are called to see things differently.

We are called to make the necessary adjustments and changes --- as God so leads us.

And not just once ----- on that beautiful day that we come to know Jesus as Lord and as Saviour --- but over and over again.

Repeatedly ----- as many times as God asks and directs us to.

Encounters with the living God and Jesus Christ ----- inform and re-shape everything we do.

Encounters with God cause us to see things differently.

They are not experiences that we can take casually.

There's nothing casual about the encounter at the Temple in our Old Testament reading today.

In one single visit to the temple ----- Isaiah's life is changed.

Sometimes in order to ensure that there is any real possibility for God to reveal Himself to us ----- we have to intentionally make room for awe-inspired silence and humility.

I think it was Thomas Merton who said ---- "Prayer is talking with God ---- and contemplative silence is listening to God."

"Prayer is talking with God and contemplative silence is listening to God."

Isaiah and Nicodemus had clearly done some work --- laid some foundations --- made some preparatory steps that would heighten and hone their ability and willingness to be open and receptive to God's direction in their lives.

It would have been a huge risk for someone of Nicodemus's standing to go to Jesus.

Nicodemus was a highly respected teacher and authority ----- and Jesus was beginning to ruffle the feathers of the establishment ----- that's why Nicodemus travels by night --- so no one would see him – minimize the risk of being seen.

And the risks were high for Isaiah as well ---- stepping up and saying --- "God told me this --- thus says the Lord" ----- as Isaiah repeatedly did ----- was a huge risk.

Old Testament prophecy has been described this way -----

"Slowly he rose ---- and the crowd fell silent.

Those at the back leaned forward ---- straining to hear.

The atmosphere was electric.

He spoke --- and his carefully chosen words flew like swift arrows --- and found their mark.

The great man --- a spokesman for God --- was warning ----- and condemning.

The crowd became restless --- shifting positions ---- clenching fists --- and murmuring.

Some agreed with his message --- nodding their heads and weeping softly.

But most were angry --- and they began to shout back insults and threats.”

Such was the life of a prophet --- threatening --- sometimes full of insults and threats.

It was risky business.

Sometimes declaring --- or sharing --- or changing our path ----- in light of what God has revealed to us can be difficult.

But in truth ----- the alternative is far more difficult.

Throwing away the possibility of medaling the 1970 World Championships by altering his 3rd jump would have been difficult for Vinko Bogataj --- but the alternative --- a potentially fatal crash landing was far more tragic.

What the world may see and define as valuable ----- a chance at a medal at the world championships.

Or remaining respectable --- in high and good standing --- instead of doing as God wants.

Or --- maintaining the status quo --- and not altering or inviting people to change.

Whatever it is that the world --- our culture --- may see as valuable is always secondary ---- and of a far lesser value than what God calls us to do and be.

God calls us to see things differently ----- to do things differently --- and God calls us to invite ---- and encourage others --- to see and do things differently as well.

And He calls us to do by leading by example in word ----- and in deed.

It won't always be easy ----- a lot was on the line for Nicodemus in going to see Jesus --- it was risky.

A lot was on the line for Isaiah --- it too was risky ---- he would no longer be on the sidelines ----- now he would be thrust into the public square and become unpopular and often unwelcome --- insults and threats would now be hurled his way.

Seeing things differently is what God asks of us --- and seeing things differently is what God equips us to do.

The Holy Spirit often works through the events of our day to draw attention to God's will for human life.

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And we have to be discerning enough and courageous enough to seize these opportunities and stand up and do as God so leads us.

And that's precisely what happens in Isaiah's life ----- he's traveling to the Temple to worship --- business as usual ---- only suddenly on this day the spirit enables him to see things differently --- drawing attention to God's will for human life --- proclaiming a new message ---- the King is dead there is a new way and new voice.

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And that's precisely what happens in Nicodemus' life ---- desirous to find out about this Jewish teacher and healer --- miracle worker even --- who's beginning to attract a whole of attention ----- Jesus.

Nicodemus goes to Him ----- drawing attention to God's will for human life --- specifically salvation in Jesus Christ.

Seeing things differently requires a certain openness and attentiveness ----- -- a willingness to change on the go --- and alter our path as new information comes to light.

Seeing things differently --- seeing things in light of Christ ----- sometimes easy --- often not.

Seeing things differently --- seeing things in light of Christ ----- often counter cultural ---- asking us to do something a little bit differently than how the rest of the world functions.

Seeing things in light of Christ ----- the most exciting ---- rewarding ----- fruitful and meaningful endeavor this life has to offer.

Living in the saving light of Christ ----- what each and every one of us is called to do --- with humility --- with patience --- with courage --- and not relying on our own strength ---- but on the strength and guidance we receive in His name.

Praise be to God that we can have the eyes ---- and the heart ---- and the willingness to see things differently.

Praise be to God that we can have the eyes ---- and the heart --- and the courage ---- and the willingness ---- to see things in light of Christ.

The beauty we experience when we are alive in Christ ---- and the Holy Spirit is alive in us.

God's will quietly ---- and powerfully ----- unfolding as each day passes.

These are glimpses into the Kingdom of Heaven ---- into all that God has in store.

When we see things differently we are blessed with deeper and greater glimpses of all that God has in store for His creation.

And when we see things differently as Nicodemus did even if only for a moment ---- and Isaiah did for a lifetime.

When we see things in light of Christ ---- it's saving --- and it is reconciling --- and it is redeeming --- and it is beautiful.

Praise be to God --- that we can indeed see things differently.

Praise be to God that we can indeed see things --- in light of Christ.

This week may we be attentive to seeing things differently.

May we be attentive to seeing things not just as the world sees them ---- but may we see things ----- in light of Christ?

Our prophet --- our priest ---- and our King --- the saving one.

Amen.