

October 18, 2009

Feast of St. Luke

Isaiah 43:8-13

Hey! That's Us!

My mom is really into genealogy. She e-mails distant relatives all over the country asking them for information. She really scores when someone sends her pictures of our ancestors. From time to time, she'll e-mail me a black and white photo of people I don't recognize. But every once in a while, she'll send one that shows people I remember, but I don't recognize them because the picture was taken twenty years before I was born. She even sent me a couple that show her before she was married. Imagine her excitement when she opened those photos on her computer and thought, "Hey! That's me!" What a moment of discovery!

Today, we have a similar moment of discovery before us in the Bible. Of course, I'm not talking about an old photograph. God didn't preserve any pictures for us in his Word. But again and again, God describes people and events for us. And today, as he speaks words that are 2,700 years old, he invites us to take a closer look and recognize: **Hey! That's us!**

I.

Where do we see ourselves this morning? In Old Testament Israel. Isaiah wrote these words about 700 years before Jesus was born. But always, when God speaks to Old Testament Israel, his message says something to us. That is very much the case today. **Hey! That's us being given our sight!**

I personally am a little afraid that some day I might lose my sight. A couple of years ago, another pastor looked at my laptop and saw how big the characters are and he mocked me for not being able to see. So it always hits me when God calls people blind. And that's what he does today. He says, "**Lead out those who have eyes but are blind, who have ears but are deaf.**"

Who is God calling blind and deaf? It's Israel. And there was no reason for it. It's one thing when a person's eyes or ears don't work properly. We can understand why they would be blind or deaf. But God gave Israel functioning eyes and working ears and still they saw and heard nothing. Now, obviously, God is not talking about Israel's physical characteristics. How could a whole nation be physically blind or deaf? The blindness and deafness of Israel was spiritual. God had given them his word. God had showed them his love again and again throughout their history. They had every ability to see and understand what he was telling them, but they chose not to. They focused their attention so thoroughly on their own affairs and they wrapped their thinking so completely around their own ideas that when God spoke to them, it was like he wasn't even there.

But to that blind and deaf people, the Lord said, "**You are my witnesses and my servant whom I have chosen.**" How could that be? God was going to make them see and hear. God was going to reach into their hearts and change them. He did that. But first, they had to pass through a terrible judgment. God was going to send them into exile in Babylon. There, he would purify his people. When they returned, they returned in joy and in faith. Their eyes were opened.

Did the people deserve God's judgment? Yes, they did. God could've turned his back on them forever. It would have been just for him to do that. But his mercy prevailed. Instead of leaving his chosen people in the blindness and deafness they loved, God made them see and hear. That's the connection between Israel and us. Many times in the Old Testament, Israel serves as a prophecy of us. Not of us Americans. But of us Christians. We believers are the people of God. Israel's history is a kind of living prophecy about what God was going to do for us. The blindness and sight of Israel is a prophecy of the blindness and sight of God's new people.

Every one of us was born spiritually blind and deaf. So we had no ability to comprehend God at all. When I was a child, I read a biography of Helen Keller. When she was nineteen months old, an illness destroyed her sight and vision. Her family had almost no ability to communicate with her. The book described her darting to the dinner table, following the smell of food and seizing handfuls off the table. But all that changed when a woman named Anne Sullivan broke through to her by finger spelling words into her hands. Spiritually speaking, we were all as blind and deaf as Keller was. We had no concept of the messages God was trying to give us. He wrote them into our hearts, where he put a basic concept of his law. He wrote them in the universe that we see all around us. Many gifted people have tried to puzzle those messages out. But no blind

and deaf sinner can find the true meaning. So God did a miracle. He invaded our sinful hearts through the gospel and he opened our eyes and ears.

That made a tremendous difference. In our spiritual blindness, we would've lived to please only ourselves. You know that's true because you know how hard it is – even now that we are believers – to live for other people. You know how hard it is to actually put what God says ahead of what we want. In our spiritual deafness, we walked around as if God had never said anything. Again, you know that's true because you know how easy it is for us even now to disregard what God has said. The blindness and deafness we were born with is still waiting there in our hearts, desperate to reassert control. If it does, we will get what we deserve: death and hell.

But Jesus came to free us from that death and hell. He was the only human being ever to live his whole life in perfect sight of God and with perfect attention to every detail of his word. Jesus offered that perfect life as the payment for our sins. He traveled down the road through death and hell for us and bumped us off that road. He came to us in the message of his love and sacrifice and he opened our eyes and our ears. That message is the very power of God. That message that tells what God has done is what makes us see and hear. God reaches into us through that account of Christ living and dying and rising again and we are never the same. God made you his and promised that you will live with him forever.

II.

God had a purpose in doing all that for Israel. He made them his witnesses. Think of that! If you were a lawyer and you had the biggest trial of your career coming up, would you call a witness who was blind and deaf? God did. God does not appear and speak directly to us. He works through his Word and he appoints witnesses to speak for him. Since every human witness is born sinful, he has to change us all. When we read about God calling Israel to testify, we see ourselves. **Hey! That's us being called as witnesses.**

God pictures all nations on earth gathered together to hear Israel's testimony. Their story stuns the court. Israel's history is one of those things that no one could've predicted. In the ancient world, peoples did not come back from exile. They disappeared into the conquering nation. But God brought Israel home. Then, God said: **“You are my witnesses ... and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he.”** Did you catch the strange thing God said? Israel was God's witness so that Israel herself might know and believe and understand who God was. Usually, a witness speaks to someone else. But God appointed his people to tell themselves about the God they had.

They had a tremendous story to tell: the God of Israel was greater than any other god because he is the only God: **“Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me.”** Israel lived in an age in which people believed in many different gods. But none of the gods the ancients worshipped were all-powerful like the true God is. They were limited and really reflected the ideas of the people who made them up. But the Lord is different. He is the eternal god. He was always there. He always will be there. And he is alone in being God. That's very unpopular today, but God rejects the idea that there is any God but him.

God said, **“I, even I, am the LORD, and apart from me there is no savior. I have revealed and saved and proclaimed— I, and not some foreign god among you.”** Israel could never bring themselves to let go of the gods of the peoples around them. The Lord had brought them up out of Egypt and gave them a homeland and watched over them for almost a thousand years. Yet, they kept going to those foreign gods because they were so much more exciting. But Israel had only one Savior. He had delivered them again and again. And he had promised them eternal life. No foreign god had ever done anything for them. And no foreign idol could take away their sin and their idolatry. Only the God who promised to send a Savior could do that.

That was the message God appointed Israel to witness to. He asked them, **“When I act, who can reverse it?”** That's a terrible thought if God is condemning us to hell. But when it comes to his great acts of salvation, the acts that his people remember and encounter here and share with the world, nothing can change what God has done.

What God has done is appoint us, the New Testament Church, as his witnesses to replace Israel. The story God has given us is even greater than the story he gave to Israel. He took us, who weren't a people at all and he made us the people of God. He took us who were born in sin and unbelief, and he gave us faith. He took us who were living in spiritual exile, with our hearts so far from him that we fought his gospel kicking and

screaming with all our might. But he reached into our hearts and he made us his. He made us the new Israel. He made us the people of God.

What is our purpose? Why do we gather here each week? It's not to bring an offering. It's not to check this off our list of things we need to do to get right with God. It's not even to praise him – at least not in the sense that most people mean that. We come here because this is the place where we see Jesus. This is the place where the testimony about Christ is repeated to us over and over again. We come here because in the word and the sacraments, we see the cross here. We see the empty tomb here. We see Jesus living and dying and rising again to take our sins away.

Only God could give us what we have here. No one else would've conceived of sending their own son to die for us. That's the story we're witnesses to. Imagine if you were walking down the street with your family and you saw a house on fire. You can see through the windows that people are trapped in there. They're panicking and they don't know what to do. Or they're sleeping and they don't even know the danger they're in. They will die if you don't do something. So what do you do? You turn to your son and you say, "Run inside there and pull those people out. You're going to get burned and your lungs will fill with smoke and you'll suffer pain you'll never forget. But go in there and save them."

No one would do that. But that's what God did. He sent Jesus into death and hell to pull you out. That's the miracle that God gave us to share with each other and with the world. Jesus is the only Savior that can pull us out of the fire of our own sin and death and hell. He is true man who lived in our place and died the death we deserve. He is the Son of God whose death and life again counts for the whole world. In our day there are so many other religious ideas out there. And so many of them are so seductive. They seem so much more interesting or exciting or attractive. But Jesus is the only Savior.

What God did through him can never be undone. He won eternal life for you. When he baptized you he claimed you for Jesus. When he put faith in your heart he gave you a gift no man can take from you. That's the picture we see reflected in God's promise to love and restore Israel. We are witnesses of that truth. Today is the Festival of St. Luke, the gospel writer. God appointed him to write the story of the life of Christ. God appointed us to return to that story, day after day and week after week, so that we know it. And God appointed us to share that story with each other and with the world. What a wonderful gift he has given us in Jesus! What a wonderful gift it is to share him! Amen.