

Our Scriptures for this morning are reminiscent of the old GOOD NEWS BAD NEWS JOKES. There was a Lawyer speaking to her Client, saying "I have good news and bad news, which do you want first." The arrested man says, "Let's get the Bad News out of the way." She says, "You have no Alibi. You had Motive, Means and Opportunity, and the police found your finger prints and blood all over the Crime Scene." The accused groans and says "What good news could there possibly be?" "The Good News is according to the Blood Tests, your Cholesterol is down to 130!"

Immediately outside my office has been a print of one of the most famous of Rembrandt's paintings: "Return of the Prodigal Son". I recall seeing the original decades ago at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. What struck me at the time was the avoidance of anything spiritual or theological from the Soviet Tour Guide. She refused to see anything of God or Jesus in the Father having rushed to embrace his son. The State's interpretation was that the father had grown so old as to be blind and stoop-shouldered!

Art history tells us that this was among the last of Rembrandt's works, when popular taste had abandoned him, his finances were in ruins, his wife and 4 of his 5 children had all died. Many artists have attempted to paint this Parable, but none, where the Father and the Son both appear so broken, fragile and pathetic. The Father is weighed down in robes, accompanied by disapproving colleagues, while the son is filthy, hairless and ragged.

I had not thought of this from the Parable, however Rembrandt's portrayal makes me wonder if the Son kneeling before the Father, beaten and abused, was intended to represent Jesus?

What strikes me is how the brokenness of each, has changed both! This is the moment of Reconciliation, showing just how hard forgiveness, love and reconciliation are...

So do we imagine The Return of the Prodigal Son to the Father, only as ANY ESTRANGED FAMILY, or do can we see spiritually?

The Call of Isaiah is an extremely familiar story, most folks know it from the phrase "HERE AM I SEND ME" yet this morning I want us to understand the CONTEXT of this CALL of Isaiah from Priest to Prophet. While the Nation of Israel had in the time of Kings David and King Solomon grown to be the most powerful and wealthy Nation in the World, throughout subsequent generations the Monarchy fell to ruin.

What was supposed to have been a Holy Nation, The Capitol City of Jerusalem built as The City of GOD; had been undermined by the Kings' infidelities and murders, the Wisdom of Solomon ended with splitting the Monarchy into two Nations, Israel and Judah. The next many Kings abandoned all faith in GOD resulting in a Culture without faith, a Religion without Spirit, only going through the motions of Sacrificing animals rather than sacrificing for our sins. Their economy fell to ruin, political allies turned on one another, resulting in war after another. Does any of this sound familiar? In a time before medical science, war, poverty and economic depression, resulted in plagues and pestilence and death.

The one saving grace had been that King Uzziah, while not faithful to GOD, had been a good King, an ethical King. THE CHAPTER BEGINS: KING UZZIAH DIED!

Isaiah was the young Priest of the Temple at Jerusalem, appointed to oversee the Funeral.

Often, Funerals are different than daily life; rather than the 80-90-100 year old we have come to know, those who knew the person best, recall something about the person the rest of us had never known. Friday, we had the Memorial of a man who for decades had struggled with a loss of Memories. Week in week out his job had been to sit at the Greeter desk and smile as people came to worship. He was always incredibly pleasant and welcoming. Since COVID he had not risked returning to public Worship. At his death we came to learn he had been a Mountain climber, a Ski Instructor, a Fisherman, 30 years as a 5th Grade Teacher, and 2 years teaching English as a Second Language, a man who had rebuilt the Shack they

bought for \$6,000 into a home they sold for over \$1,000,000. A part of me wonders, as marvelous as this congregation is, what it would be to envision this same people of God at the height of careers and vitality?

As Isaiah is presiding over the Memorial of the good King Uzziah, similar to the Clouds parting this last week to observe the Eclipse unobstructed, the Curtain between Heaven and Earth was parted for a moment! Isaiah could see from the Temple at Jerusalem into the Throne Room of GOD. Isaiah cannot see everything, GOD is so grand and so large, Isaiah can see the hem of his robe, the base of GOD's throne, and over the sound of Angelic Choirs to hear the sound of Seraphim. Mythical dragon like creatures that attend GOD, soaring with six pair of wings, crying out HOLY, HOLY, HOLY! LORD, GOD ALMIGHTY!

Does Isaiah sing along with the Seraphim praising GOD? NO, with a sudden realization of humility, Isaiah mutters under his breath "WHOA IS ME! For I am a man of unclean lips, who dwells among a people of unclean lips!" The best thing in the ancient world, their one source of hope had been in the good King Uzziah, who now was dead. So what hope is there for Israel, what hope for the World, What hope for ME? Hearing the Priest's unspoken confession, the Seraphim uses tongs to grab a burning ember from the fire pots of GOD's Throne room, to correct the sin of the Priest by cauterizing his lips, burning away everything unclean! Worship Committee is meeting this week, perhaps instead of worrying about carpeting or organs, we should install Charcoal Grills in the Sanctuary and rather than a Prayer of Confession and Assurance of Pardon, we could simply have every person kiss the embers before worshipping GOD?

We come to Worship seeking to be comforted and inspired. Ancient Israel's whole worship was about atoning for their sins... What if, we took our sins and confessions as seriously as Isaiah took his?

The GOOD NEWS IS that Isaiah witnesses the Kingdom of GOD; the BAD NEWS is that as a man he realizes his own weakness. I believe that may be the unspoken remnant of our last decade as the Church in this time and place, while we mourn the death of a pastor, while we grieve, past circumstances of the Church; Can we admit the humanity and humility of us all including our Pastors? Can we look beyond the circumstances of our world today, beyond our Church, to witness the Mystery & Glory of GOD? In thinking about GOD, can we like Isaiah hear the Call from GOD: who will go for us, whom can we send? AND the BAD NEWS, that no matter how eloquent, no matter how stirring and poetic we each might be, to believe that people may never listen to us, and many will not want to hear about faith in GOD?

Over and over throughout their time together, Jesus had spoken plainly to his Disciples about his coming Arrest, Sacrifice and Resurrection and they had not believed. Jesus appears to his Disciples and they do not recognize him, they think him a GHOST. What will need to happen for us to change what we SEE from hearing the Stories of the Good Shepherd, from seeing Jesus as a Miracle Healer who can save people from blindness, leprosy, to full health; INSTEAD to recognize him as GOD WITH US? What might it take for us to look beyond our nightly aches and pains, our fears of loved ones dying, of family being broken and estranged, our worries about money and hatreds to Live in Forgiveness, Hope and RECONCILIATION?

Jesus begins, as we do at every worship of GOD, by sharing the PEACE OF GOD, Breathing on them. Before we sing, before we confess our sins, before we listen to the Scriptures and Sermon, we greet one another: PEACE BE WITH YOU!

Second, he demonstrates his own REALITY, he is not a GHOST, he eats and drinks with them. What if Coffee Hour, were not only the time to but COFFEE, to sign up for Line Dancing or a Senior's Lunch? What if in listening to each other and sharing in Cookies and Coffee and Juice, we looked for GOD IN OUR MIDST? What if speaking to one another, and listening to each other, were as important as the Choir's Anthem and the Preacher's Sermon?

Are our Hearts so calloused, our ears so dull and eyes so blind that as GOD DESCRIBES: We Listen without

HEARING? Hear one another without UNDERSTANDING? See without PERCEIVING?

Maybe, just possibly, we would find that COMFORT & CHALLENGE at Worship by listening to a neighbor?