

**A sermon preached by Rev. Jason Cashing at
Clarence Presbyterian Church on May 26, 2024.**

THE VISION OF GOD

<Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 29:1-11; John 3:1-17>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

“In the year that King Uzziah died...”.

It is an uncertain time for the people of God living in Judah. Though established, they are a small country and rich in resources, particularly coastal access to the Mediterranean Sea and all the shipping possibilities which that enables. Neighboring them, and not far off, are bigger and stronger countries which would like make Israel and Judah part of their own country - not as an ally, but as a conquered land. Chiefly among these are the Assyrians and the Babylonians. And while he was not perfect, Uzziah's reign had been one of growth and stability for the country and the people. Now though, with his death and the future somewhat unknown, it has become a somewhat uncertain time.

It is in this time that Isaiah has a vision, and such a vision would be terrifying.

Isaiah beholds the very person of God, seated on a throne in the temple, and his robe fills the temple. More accurately, it should be understood the presence of God fills the temple; there is no way that Isaiah can hide or shield himself from this full-fledged encounter with God. And Isaiah despairs, knowing that he is “ruined” as he is a man of “unclean lips” and he now beholds God face-to-face, something the seraphim in attendance do not even do. To say that Isaiah fears what will happen to him next is a safe understatement, and his future is suddenly uncertain.

“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne...”

Nicodemus is troubled. A Pharisee and a member of the Ruling Council, he is tasked with interpreting religious life and setting the tone and example for the people. This can be challenging, as well as rewarding, in the best of times, but it is not the best of the times: the people of Israel, the people of God live and exist under the thumb of Roman occupation and rule. True, they are allowed their heritage and customs, so long as those do not interfere with the Roman understanding of living. Attempting to interpret the life of faith, and to lead as a Pharisee under such conditions, must be trying, and uncertainty would underlie the day-to-day of life.

Now, there is something else rising up, as well. A teacher out of Nazareth, in Galilee, has been traveling the countryside with some popular and somewhat radical

interpretations of God and faithful living. Nicodemus needs to see him, to talk with him, for himself. We can surmise that either he is not sure how he will be received, or what his fellow Pharisees will think of him, or both, because he seeks Jesus out in the dark of the night. Nicodemus comes to Jesus, and discovers early on even more reason to be confounded and uncertain about what everything means.

Now, it is said that, where there is no vision, the people perish. And if anything can work to inhibit a vision from being determined or lived out, it is the presence of uncertainty and fear in the face of the future. A colleague of mine, who is the Executive Director of an organization tasked with strengthening and supporting church leaders, is in conversation with dozens of churches, in a myriad of denominations, around the country. He and his team work to coach ministers, sessions, boards, and leaders of churches to think adaptively and lead faithfully. And he has shared with me, and others, on a number of occasions that the reality that most inhibits a new and life-giving vision from taking root is a fear of failure and a thinking that it cannot be achieved; that the answer, the possible way forward, is too much to undertake. The churches in these situations are not necessarily without a vision, but they are without a belief that the vision can be realized. Uncertainty wins out.

I want to share with you the story of a boy named James. As a young boy, James was like most every other young child, and had his ways and tactics to stall at bedtime and avoid the actual bedtime process and routine. One summer evening, his mother, expecting the usual excuses and resistance, announced that it was bedtime, and that James should go upstairs, and she would be up a few minutes later to check on him. To her surprise, James - without a word - went straight up. Ten minutes or so later, his mother went up to check his progress and found him staring out his bedroom window at the full moon which had recently risen over the horizon. Asking him why he hadn't started to get ready for bed, James just continued looking at the moon in awe and declared to his mother that, "one day, I'm going to walk on the moon."

Young James had a vision, and he had a belief that it would be achieved. And eventually, as part of the Apollo 15 crew, James Irwin was the eighth person to set foot on the lunar surface. James did not let the potential uncertainty of his vision, or fear of it not being realized, or even a major motorcycle accident in his youth stand in the way of faithfully seeing his vision realized.

Nicodemus, while perhaps troubled and somewhat confounded by the teachings Jesus was giving him, nonetheless received a vision of God that would stay with him, guiding and informing him going forward. Later in John's gospel, Nicodemus will help defend Jesus and the gospel news to the rest of his colleagues and then, at Jesus' death, he will be one of two, with Joseph of Arimathea, who helps take and bury Jesus' body.

Isaiah, while perhaps troubled and uncertain as to the future, received the vision of God and the commandment that went with it, to go to the people in God's name and proclaim hope, good news, correction, and faithful living. He is cleansed, called, and committed to the vision of God and the vision given him by God. The Book of Isaiah, spanning

many years in the life of the people of God, would be a source of hope and comfort in uncertain times, as well as a source of challenge and conviction to live faithfully into the vision of God in all times.

And what is our vision, today? As we gather this morning on Trinity Sunday, celebrating and recognizing the mystery of the nature of God, one-in-three and three-in-one, we begin in earnest the season of Ordinary Time in the church. But this season is anything but “ordinary” in the common understanding of the term. Rather, it is the season in which, having received the good news of the resurrection and invited to again receive the Holy Spirit in Pentecost, we reflect in this season upon the vision of God as it influences and guides our own daily living. And the vision of God is one of deep, intimate relationship, modeled to us in the relationship of the persons of the Trinity.

We are formed, envisioned and created for relationship. The Trinity of God sets up the example and the expectation of recognizing how intimately connected we are, one to another, around the whole world, and how much of the fullness of that connection is found in our connection to the Divine. Ordinary Time, in the Church year, is the season in which we recognize again God breaking in to human time to begin and enact what God intends and envisions: the deep, abiding connection of all peoples, and all aspects of creation, together.

It is God’s time and vision, to see us receive this vision and live into it, more and more fully, more and more faithfully. In our reading from John this morning, the word “born” is used eight times, and all of them refer to humans and all of them are in the passive voice. Which means that Jesus is talking about something that happens to us by the grace and work of God, rather than something which we create or accomplish for our own selves. The vision of God allows us to be receptive to the Spirit of God, renewing us and calling us forward.

May we live into this vision, one of deepened faithful connection and community. May we be a people of God who, in this vision, live faithful lives in the world around us. And may our vision be directed, defined, and guided by the Spirit which continues to work in wondrous and mysterious ways. In the name of the Trinity, in the promise of relationship and connection, and in the fullness of faith. Amen.