

December 7, 2014
The National Presbyterian Church

A New Vision

Isaiah 11:1-9

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In a moment or two we're going to be thinking about the 11th chapter of the Book of the prophet Isaiah, but first let me begin with a statement that might seem to be rather obvious: that the Bible is a book that is filled with words . . . the Bible is a book that is filled with words. There are just over 12,000 different words in the Bible, whether you're looking at the original languages of Hebrew and Greek or at an English translation. Just over 12,000 different words in the Bible – words used not just to give to us sentences and propositions and statements about God; words used not just to convey laws and rules and regulations to follow, like a legal document or contract, or like an insurance policy; but words used often – not always, but often – to *paint pictures, to draw images* which God wants to place within our minds and within our hearts, to transform the way that we live our lives.

One of those images or pictures painted for us by the words of Scripture is here right before us at the Communion table: a table with bread and wine.

So we find in the Bible a story about Jesus eating a supper with his disciples, and he says to them, *“You're going to be doing this after I've gone; you're going to be doing this as a way to remember me, to remember the giving of my life, the breaking of my body and the shedding of my blood.”* And so Christians have picked up on this story and in our Presbyterian churches along with the baptismal font we have made the table to be the one piece of required liturgical equipment: *an image* before us every Sunday, an image of who Jesus is and what he did; not just in words but through a picture.

But this use of words to create images in Jesus' teaching is not limited to the table at the last supper. Throughout his teaching he paints images: images of fields and buildings, and nets and pearls, and much else. And in this, Jesus is standing in the line of Israel's ancient prophets who often illustrated their messages with drama or with verbal images – which is exactly what the prophet Isaiah does in our Scripture passage this morning.

In Isaiah 11 in particular, there are two sets of images woven together. One is of the Messiah, a person, and the other is of the Kingdom that the Messiah has come to establish. So Isaiah 11 begins like this:

A shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse and a branch shall grow out of his roots

[DR: obviously this is an image of a tree, but a tree that becomes “a family tree”! A person called Jesse is in this tree. His son we know (see 1 Samuel 16) is Israel's great

king, King David; so Isaiah is saying that somebody's going to come from this family tree, a descendant of jesse, who will be a great leader.]

The spirit of the Lord Isaiah goes on to say shall rest on him the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

[DR: and we should say yes, that's the kind of leader that I want to follow! And then the image changes to the natural realm which has been transformed by the presence of this leader. And so Isaiah writes now that . . .]

The wolf that shall live with the lamb and the leopard that shall lie down with the kid and the calf and the lion and the fatling together and a little child shall lead them he says.

[DR: And all of this is leading up to these words:]

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.

[DR: Isaiah pictures here a leader and the impact of this leader on the Kingdom that the leader comes to establish: there is no more danger; there is no more threat; there is no more injustice; things have become right . . .]

For the Earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

What a poignant image and hopeful this is that Isaiah uses in this 11th Chapter. Poignant and hopeful, but also powerful!!

We human beings are attracted to images. They wield a certain amount of power over us whether we want them to or not. In fact it's not too big a stretch to say that images and pictures are, in a sense, things we were created for. We see this from our earliest days, so that pretty soon after a baby is born, we watch the eyes begin to move – and it's not long before you realize that this little thing is watching and looking and seeing things: taking it all in!!

Or we can go back to our own childhood and think about the role of pictures within our own growth and development. In my own childhood, as a little child I remember my big sister reading those big books that I didn't want to read: books filled with words and very few pictures! I would only want to read books that were filled with pictures. If there weren't pictures in the book I didn't want to read them.

So we give to our children, to begin with, not just books with words, but books with pictures.

And this passion for pictures and images seems to be built into who we are, not just in childhood, but throughout life. Even as adults we're engrossed by pictures, by the visual. So even if we like radio we tend to watch television more than we listen to radio, because in addition to the words and to the sounds, well, there are pictures. And the pictures seem to be getting better and better on the gadgets that we use to see these pictures.

- So we begin with radio and then we move to television.
- And we move from black and white television to color television. (*Which reminds me of a statement my father made many years ago, when we bought our first color television. He said that he always slept better in front of the color television than he ever did front of the*

black and white television! – so he was really glad for this movement in improving visual presentations!)

- And we move from color television to high definition television.
- And we move from high definition television (this Christmas it's new – if you haven't seen this you're going to be seeing it) to ultra-high definition television with resolution four times better than anything we've ever seen before.

And so it goes on.

But this is, though, is just the tip of the iceberg. Behind it stands a multi-billion dollar industry built on visual graphics and images, whether it's in television or whether it's in cameras or in movies, whether it's in music videos or in video games. Or whether it's in works of art or whether it's in going way down the line to pornography (a multi-billion dollar enterprise in and of itself; see <http://www.covenanteyes.com/pornstats/>).

Images are powerful and important to us. They attract and often determine our attention. And the power of those images can be seen not only in our lives as individuals but in our lives corporately. And that power can be absolutely enormous.

Think back to live images coming into our homes from Vietnam. The first trans-oceanic telecommunication satellites has just been launched (Telstar and Relay 1, both in 1962), and now we can see things instantly that we could never see instantly before. And in the 1960s opinion is shaped, public opinion is shaped, or at least the debate begins to be shaped and reshaped, by images which are coming at us in a way that has never happened before.

Or slightly more up date: go back to the late 1980s and into Poland. A significant part in the revolution against communism in Poland was played by videos! . . . for example, by the distribution of copies of videos of the demonstrations in Gdansk. In a way that had not been possible before, events could be recorded and copied easily, and then disseminated, so people could see what they couldn't see before (see Ted Koppel, "Revolution in a Box", September 13, 1989).

So images had the power to change our own nation, and the fabric of society in Western and Eastern Europe in the 1960's and the 1980s. And this is true of course today when it comes to the news and the power of the web. Images today are just as powerful.

- Whether it's the image of a man about to be beheaded. Who would think we would ever see that? Or that such a thing would ever come to our attention; I mean this seems to come from the Dark Ages. It seems to come from 400 years ago but it's less than 40 days ago and this image is doing the rounds in the world in which we live today.
- Or think of the image that some of you have seen of Eric Garner surrounded by law enforcement agents; and he's losing consciousness and he's saying (and I've watched it again and again) he is saying, he says it 11 times – 11 times!! – "*I can't breathe, I can't breathe, I can't breathe, I can't breathe, I can't breathe.*" And he loses consciousness and this man dies, and it's caught, you can see it, on camera.

So we're attracted to these images and they are powerful and they stir up conversations within our hearts, within our minds, within our lives within our society for good or for evil.

Some years ago business guru Tom Peters (in *Thriving On Chaos*) picked up on this thought when he said that one of the great things that binds successful leaders together is that their ability to use stories and symbols – using words to create images. This was certainly a skill used by one of my heroes in World War II, Winston Churchill. In his speeches he created images that people could visualize, see with their mind's eye, whether it was the image of a beach or of planes in the air, or of people with heads bowed surrendering.

More up to date, though now 50 years ago, you come to August of 1963 right here in Washington and you find Martin Luther King Junior giving a speech which is littered with images from the beginning to the end. Powerful images, some of which linger in our minds and are transformative, or should be transformative for the way we live our lives even to this day.

One of his images is of the *Declaration of Independence* and of the *United States Constitution* – written documents, filled with words, but he uses the documents themselves as well as their content as “images.” He says that we need to think of them as “promissory notes” or as “checks which need to be cashed in the Bank of Justice.” And then he says that they've been marked “insufficient funds.” And then he adds, positively, that this is sad and unnecessary, because there is enough money in the bank in our great country to cash the check and pay the note. So it shouldn't be marked that way.

Or perhaps the most memorable image of all that he uses, is the image of children playing together. So simple, so simple – all kinds of children. And then he makes it personal, his child among them. So he says

I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream that one day little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

And then he adds this image. An image of all the difficulties in life vanishing – standing in contrast to the earlier word-images about problems and obstacles. In his speech puts it like this. He says,

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted and every hill and mountain shall be made low. The rough places will be made plain and the crooked places will be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

And if we find ourselves wanting to sing that image we perhaps know the music that goes with it. There are some people who might say well Handel wrote those words. But neither Handel nor Martin Luther King Junior wrote those words. They come straight from Scripture; in fact, they come straight from the book of the prophet Isaiah (40:1-5), the book we're reading from today, a book filled with images – images of the Messiah and of the Kingdom that he has come to establish; what the universe will look like when the king has completed his work.

Isaiah is filled with those images of the Messiah, both of a person, and of the impact of this person's life (and of the people who join themselves to this person, the Messiah) on the world.

So it's this picture of the world as-it-ought-to-be, and one-day-will-be that we see in our passage of scripture in Isaiah 11.

Indeed, we also see it if we go back a couple of chapters, to Isaiah Chapter 9 . . . remember the passage we so often read at Christmas each year?—“*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.*” It's a powerful image of hope within a world bent out of shape: a dark world. And it certainly influences later writers of Scripture.

For example, John, as he writes his account of Jesus' ministry, speaks about the incarnation in the same terms: of Jesus entering the darkness as light, and the darkness not being powerful enough to overcome the light.

And Jesus himself picks up on this image. Indeed Isaiah's prophecy fills Jesus' life and mind in the way that he sets his direction (see Isaiah 61:1,2) and when he says “I am the light of the world”: a fairly explicit reference to his work as the Messiah fulfilling this prophecy. And then he uses the same image for his disciples, to grasp their role as members of his Messianic Kingdom. He says to you and me “you are the light of the world” (Matt. 5:14). So that he takes the image and he says that *this is to be the image which guides our lives – your life, my life – so that the world is changed, step by step, by who we are and what we do and by what we see in our mind's eye.*

And the images in Isaiah 9 then continue into Isaiah 11 where the image of the Messiah and the image of his Kingdom are presented to us again.

The image of the Messiah in Isaiah Chapter 11 focuses in particular on the passion of this leader, this Messiah, for justice in the world, and especially for those who have no power. He says of the Messiah that

“He shall not judge by what his eyes see.” [DR: obviously, this is a picture of the Messiah as a judge] “or decide by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor” [DR: He's not going to be superficial in his judgment. He's going to dig deep within lives within the mystery of human life] and decide with equity for the meek of the Earth. He shall strike the Earth with the rod of his mouth and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist and faithfulness the belt around his loins

When John the Baptist remembered these words and saw Jesus, he couldn't make sense of them. Jesus was too gentle! Jesus didn't resemble this warrior judge. So he said to Jesus, “*You're not the Messiah are you? You don't fit the image. You're too weak. You're too meek.*” So Jesus holds up to John another image from Isaiah of the healing ministry of the Messiah (62), as if to say, “You've got the wrong picture in your mind!! You're right, I don't fit Isaiah 11 at the moment – I fit Isaiah 62!! I'm here I weakness at the moment, but the time will come when I'll return in strength, as the Messiah of Isaiah 11. In Christian theology, of course, we tie this “time to come” to with the second coming of Christ. He comes in gentleness the first time but it's the

one who is the judge, the one who in time will judge the quick and the dead, who is the one who comes at the first, and who will complete his work in this way in the end.

And then Isaiah goes on to what it is that he wants to complete. What is this Kingdom he wants to build? What changes does the Messiah want to see within this world? And Isaiah puts it like this.

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together. And a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear and the lion and the ox and the child and the snake will not hurt or destroy on all God's holy mountain. [When God's work is finished they will not hurt or destroy; when the Messiah's work is finished they will not hurt or destroy anywhere; pain and suffering and danger will be gone] for the Earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Of course it's easy to dismiss an image such as this as just "pie in the sky." It's easy to dismiss an image such as this as a mere illusion, as if anyone who lifted up such an image was naïve, oblivious to the power of evil in this world. It's easy to say that the realistic person needs to be strong enough to bring such an image crashing down, destroying it before our eyes and (for our own good) disabusing us of such a childish illusion.

But to do that with this image and the other images in the book of the prophet Isaiah would be to miss the point completely. The point is precisely to draw a picture of something which is beyond our reach (not just a picture, not just a graphic though, but a vision; and not just our vision, but God's vision); to draw a vision which at first seems impossible but which will grab our attention and set our direction as long as we have breath within us. If the vision is not big and in a sense, if it is not out of reach it is not worthy of our allegiance.

President Roosevelt understood this. So going back once again to World War II, in response to Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt set goals for military preparedness which were enormous, and to begin with seemed to be out of reach. At that time he had a young advisor by the name of Peter Drucker, and in a 1989 interview with Bill Moyers, Drucker shared these words about an encounter he had with President Roosevelt. He said,

"I'll never forget when President Roosevelt announced publicly that we would build 30,000 fighter planes. I was on the task force that worked on our economic strength and we had just reached the conclusion that we would build at most 4,000. We thought 'For goodness sake, he's senile.' But two years later we built not 30,000 but 50,000." And Drucker concludes, "I don't know he knew or whether he just realized (intuitively) that unless you set objectives very high you don't achieve anything at all."

So Isaiah sets this lofty vision and other lofty visions. A wolf and a lamb, a calf and a lion, a child and a snake. The end of pain and suffering and unfairness. And his implication is simple: "This is the way I want it to be, the way God wants it to be, the way, one day, it will be!! And then Jesus embraces these visions in Isaiah as his own, as the description of who he is as the Messiah and of the Kingdom that he wants to come and establish. And, so he too says to you and

me that we need to join his Kingdom, and give our allegiance to him as Messiah, and follow in the direction set by the vision, in whatever sphere of life you live.

For some the vision is to have its power in the great affairs of life (or in the apparently great affairs of life – who truly knows but God what is great or small?).

For others the vision will have its power in the small things in life (at times so small, but great to God that no one ever sees them).

But in whatever sphere we're in, says Jesus – here's the direction I, as your Messiah King, want to set for your life, lived out within my Kingdom. A direction not just set in words but in pictures that have the power to place themselves in our head and to influence our lives more than we can imagine.

So the questions for today I suppose are these:

What picture is it that is in your mind or what pictures are in your mind?

What person is in your mind as the person for whom you live?

And does that person set you free or imprison you?

Is there in your mind's eye an image of someone who has the power to set you free or limit or imprison you? And if it's not the picture of the Messiah maybe today is the day in which your picture needs to be changed and replaced?

And is your picture of the world a picture of despair? (As I would confess at times my picture often is and has been in recent months as we look at the news around about us). Is it a picture of despair?

Or is it the picture that Isaiah presents for us – reminding us that no matter how dark the world is, his kingdom will come, will win out, and we are to pursue it as those who belong to the Messiah?

Keep this in mind: that when Isaiah wrote his words, 700 years before the birth of Christ, looming large on the horizon (in the same area in which we have so much trouble today in the northern part of Syria) was a nation called Assyria and behind them the nation of Babylon; and their power was rising rapidly and destroying the world as the people of Israel and Judah knew it.

And it was in this world that Isaiah wrote his words, as if to say "God has not lost or forgotten us. His Messiah is on the way and his Kingdom will not fail."

Keep these images in your mind. These are not just images but God's vision for your life and mine. And if these images are not in your mind well then perhaps we need to read the book more. And if we don't like all the words in the book, well get a Children's Bible book . . . skip the words and look at the pictures! And let them be the channel of God's power in your life.

Let us pray. Holy God look down upon us. We are weak but you are strong. Help us to be followers of the Messiah who came to us in weakness and know a strength that comes from him that will touch our world either in small ways or large but touch our world and move it in the direction you want. So bless us and make us a blessing and raise up men and women to do your will in this world which you love and to which you sent your son. Amen.

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