

Looking for light in all the wrong places

Isaiah 50:4-9a, Mark 8:27-38

A Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

We have quite a collection of rough texts today. In the text from Mark, Jesus rebukes Peter: "Get behind me, Satan!" In the Isaiah text the Lord's servant tries to comfort his people, and they in turn treat him despicably. What should a preacher do with all this?

Let's start with the Suffering Servant. Here is this one, this Servant, who questions what he'd doing and what it's all about and asks: ". . . who walks in darkness and has no light, yet trusts in the name of the Lord and relies upon his God?" (Isaiah 50:10)

Where is light? Where is God? What is evil? Who am I?

I am reminded of Ole, who came home one evening in the dark, and as he was trying to open the door, he dropped his keys. But it was dark by the door so he walked out to the street lamp and started looking on the ground there. A neighbor looking out his window saw him and came out and said: "Ole, what are you looking for?" Ole said: "I dropped my keys trying to open the door." The neighbor said: "Well then, why are you looking here?" Ole said: "Because the light is better here."

This is kind of the situation that we're in. It's described also in that well known place in John 9 about the man born blind and was healed, and then in John 9:39 Jesus says: "I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind."

It's all turned over in a different way because we think we can find the answer, we think we can find light where it isn't.

In this whole passage in Isaiah there is that problem: How is God working? He had promised they would be a great people. They would have a land and a temple, a ruler, and it all went to pieces in 587 BC. The Babylonians, led by Nebuchadrezzar, destroyed everything. Then in 538 BC, another unknown, Cyrus, a Persian, restored them. Then they built a beautiful temple and a very modest wall around it.

In Isaiah 10:5 it refers to Assyria as the Lord's servant and rod for punishment. This is repeated in Jeremiah 43:10. In this section of Isaiah we are in today it says of Cyrus, a non-Israelite, that he is the Messiah. He is the anointed one (Isaiah 45:1). What?

How is God working? He's using these terrible tyrants to carry out his work. We don't understand it.

Therefore, the Suffering Servant says: "I don't have any light. I can't see."

In Isaiah 45, after calling Cyrus the Messiah, it says in verse 7: "I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe, I am the Lord, who do all these things." The Lord does, it seems to us, both good and evil. Makes light and darkness. Then in Isaiah 45:15: "Truly you are a God who hides yourself, O God of Israel, the Savior."

The one true Lord is a God who is not self-evident to us and who doesn't work the way we think. It is as if we are blind and totally unable to find the light. And the answer is not in the Book of Job, although the Book of Job 40:8 says: "Who do you think you are that you are judging God?"

Nevertheless, that raises the right question. Where is light? Where is God? Where is truth?

We have among us a couple of common answers. One of them is: "Well, we are made in the image of God." You recall it says in Gen 1:27 that we are created in the image of God, and it repeats that in Genesis 9:6. That fosters the idea that there is something in us, a spark of God, a little something that knows God. We say: "If you would look inside yourself in the very depths, if you would be quiet and listen, then you would find in your inner self that which is able to hear God and respond to God."

But that's not what the Old Testament means. And the reason that clearly is not what the Old Testament means is what happened to the Old Testament people with idolatry. (The words image, idol, and icon, are all the same word.) They had fallen into idolatry again and again, and eventually the Lord had to start over after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. They learned their lesson. And they said: "No way, no more, not ever again, any idols." And therefore, the idea that somehow there is in us an image of God, an icon within us, is totally foreign to what they were about.

In the New Testament in Colossians 3:10 it specifically says the image of God was lost and restored in Jesus Christ. What does the image of God mean that mean, that metaphor in the Old Testament? If you look at the next verse, Gen 1:28, it says we human beings have been given a task, to have dominion, to care for the earth and its creatures.

In addition to that there is among us the idea that ultimately man is the measure of all things and ultimately our reason, our thinking, has to be able to see and determine. We have to be able to see through creation to the God beyond. Otherwise, we say: "It's not fair." We think God has to do it so that we can come to some kind of decision and judgment that makes sense to us.

Finally, we come back to asking: Who are we? We're looking where there is no light because we insist on doing it our way. As a matter of fact, as the Bible describes it, we are creatures and we are lost. With that the Gospel text gives us the hint of what it's all about.

Remember, that on the way to in Caesarea Philippi, as they were walking, Jesus asked them: "Who do people say that I am?" They give various answers. And then he asks: "Who do you say that I am?" And Peter answers: "You are the Christ!"

And then Jesus says, "Well, that means that there is going to be a great deal of difficulty, and I am going to die and rise again." And Peter says: "That can't be." And Jesus turns and says to him: "Get behind me, Satan!" – because you, Peter, don't get it. You don't think the things of God, but the things of man.

What does that tell us about who we are and about our situation? It tells us first of all that God has done something beyond all of our thinking. He became a creature, and not only that, he died and rose again. That's complete foolishness, complete darkness to our way of thinking. That does not mean that we are able to sort God out or judge God. And it tells us something about our being blind, without light, our basic lostness, and how we look for light in all the wrong places.

But it also says something about how God solves this. God solves this, not only by becoming one of us, but then by adopting us. Adoption is a remarkable way of describing how God takes those who are not his in any internal way (no spark of divinity in us) and makes us his sons and daughters. He does it by his Word and by his Spirit, in spite of us.

You may know of Pascal, a famous French physicist, inventor, and also a great Christian thinker, who lived in the 1600's. When he died, in the belt around his waist they found a folded piece of paper, and on that paper it said: "Not the God of the philosophers and the scholars [those for whom God occupies a definite position in a system of thought], but the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" – the God who does it his way, a light which is not in us, but a light which he gives us, and by which he makes us his own, in spite of us. And therefore, it is absolutely sure. Amen