



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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What God Sees

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His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth ... (Isaiah 11:3-4).

When the kingdom of heaven comes near, some things have to change. That's why the first message preached in the gospels calls people to repent. Repentance in the Bible doesn't mean just saying you're sorry, confessing your sins, and relying on God's grace to forgive you. The Greek word is *metanoia*. It means a fundamental transformation in the way you see things, the way you think about yourself and the world.

"Do not presume," John the Baptist says to his religious neighbors. Don't presume that you're right with God just because you're descendants of Abraham and follow certain rules and observe a handful of holidays. John's message to us today would be, roughly, "Don't presume that you're right with God just because you show up in church. You need a whole new mindset." Or as St. Paul puts it, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God...."

Lots of people take God more or less for granted these days, because what they call "God" is largely a creature of their own imagination. Home-made gods tend to go easy on their followers. They don't raise up prophets to challenge them. They take the appearance of religion at face value, without judging the believer's heart or testing claims of faithfulness by what people actually do with their resources or how they care for others around them.

“You brood of vipers!” John calls the Pharisees and Sadducees. He obviously skipped the Dale Carnegie course on “How to Win Friends and Influence People.” John doesn’t flatter his audience. He doesn’t mince any words, because his message is serious. The Messiah, the Christ, is coming. “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” When the Messiah comes, you’ll want to be among the wheat and not among the chaff, John says.

How different all this is from breaking out the eggnog, and playing “Jingle Bells,” and stringing lights on Christmas trees. As we said last week, getting ready for Christmas is not at all the same thing as getting ready for Christ.

“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,” Isaiah said long ago. No doubt he imagined an earthly leader along the lines of King David. “His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord,” Isaiah says.

How can fear and delight go together? In fact, we experience that combination in all sorts of ways from time to time. Some new challenge or adventure frightens you, but at the same time you’re excited, and you feel something like a strange delight in the fear itself. Or maybe you’ve admired someone from afar, and you finally call her up for a date; you’re terrified she’ll turn you down, but the fear of rejection only magnifies your feelings. Truth be told, fear and delight can wrap around each other like the double helix of our DNA at the very core of our existence. And it turns out that a healthy fear of the Lord can be the deepest delight of the soul.

This figure to come that Isaiah foresees looks to Christian eyes a lot like Christ the King. When Christ comes he will not judge by what his eyes see or what his ears hear. Christ will judge by the quality of the heart, and by the actions that grow out of the heart and show what it's truly made of. And Christ will judge with righteousness, which means he will not only see us clearly for what we are, but will also know what we can become, and help us get from here to there.

All of this points to Isaiah's vision where the wolf and the lamb live together, and the calf and the lion get along in peace. Woody Allen famously said that the lion and the lamb shall lie down together, but the lamb won't get much sleep. We all know the ways of lions and lambs in this world. But Isaiah's image is powerful precisely because it points to the radical transformation that comes with the kingdom of God: "They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."

The coming of Christ is a bridge from this world to that world, to the coming kingdom of God. When Christ comes into any human heart, it's like a shoot that sprouts up where only a stump has been. It's like the first flowers of spring, when the earliest crocuses are beautiful in themselves but also serve as signs of hope for all that's on its way. When Christ comes, he will judge with righteousness, because he sees what God sees, and he comes to make all things new.



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