

Isaiah 60:1-6 Pastor Bill Uetricht 1/05/20 Epiphany

Sometimes when I am approaching this preaching task, I am taken by the big movement of the text, the trajectory of the readings. Sometimes, though, I am captured by one line, maybe even one word. Today is one of those times.

Isaiah's words "Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice" really caught my attention this week. Literally, the end of that sentence can be interpreted as saying, "your heart will be enlarged, will be stretched."

As we begin a new year, I wonder if that is not the prayer that we might have for ourselves. Yeah, we want to lose weight. Yeah, we want to be more careful with our money. Yeah, we want to increase our exercise routine. But maybe what we want more than anything is to have our hearts stretched, enlarged. Now I know that physically we don't want to have our hearts enlarged. That leads to serious negative health consequences. But in a more metaphorical way, isn't an enlarged, stretched heart what we want for ourselves?

After all, isn't it a small, constricted heart that has brought us to some of the unwanted places to which we have gone? Places like never-ending anger, grudges, hard-heartedness to strangers and foreigners, road rage, violence, small-mindedness, war after war after war. Stretch our hearts, O God. Enlarge them!

Isaiah, in today's first reading, is writing to an audience of Jews who are back home in Jerusalem and who are not experiencing the greatness that they thought was promised to them. Some of these are exiles who have come home only to discover a home that is devastated, for the Babylonians did a number on their town. They destroyed the temple, and it still is in ruins. Some of them probably wondered, "Should we even have come home?"

Isaiah says, “Arise, shine; your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” It is, as singer Michael Buble croons, “a new day, a new dawn.” You sent your money and your people to other lands. Now other people, their money, their goods are coming your way.

“Lift up your eyes and look around. There’s going to be a family reunion. Your sons who didn’t come home are now coming home. Your daughters and their babies are coming, too. You shall see and be radiant. What you wanted is what you are going to get. Your heart shall thrill and rejoice. Your heart shall be expanded, stretched, enlarged. You will make room for joy.”

True joy requires hearts that are expanded, doesn’t it? Anger and bitterness tend to restrict the heart. They tend to close us in on ourselves. They are apt to make the world smaller. Joy opens up the world, opens up the mind, opens up, stretches the heart. Have you noticed that often the most miserable people to be around are those whose minds are closed in on themselves and their narrow agendas and opinions? When the world is often collapsed like that, joy is not possible; crabbiness and grumpiness are. In fact, they are not only possible, they are likely.

The reason the heart of Israel is being enlarged, being stretched, is because God is acting in a new way for the sake of Israel. As I said before, it’s a new day, a new dawn. It strikes me that enlarged hearts don’t come just because we *will* them. True change doesn’t come just because we make a resolution to be different.

This is not, by the way, an excuse for avoiding resolutions, an excuse for staying the same. I exercise regularly because one day I decided that I was going to exercise regularly. And I still do. But I suspect that the biggest changes in our lives don’t come simply because of our will, our choosing. The biggest changes come in spite of

ourselves. They come because of something bigger than us. Sheer will power isn't enough. People out of the twelve step movements grasps this. The second step of Alcoholics Anonymous is this: "We came to be aware that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity." Will power isn't enough. Something greater than the self is necessary for sanity, for change.

Paul and Luther both recognized that for the most part people don't change in a lasting way by means of the law, that is, by our demanding the change, by yelling them into change, by shaming them into it. Lasting change often comes when people are grasped by something greater than they, when they are discovered by a grace that loves them in spite of, as my favorite professor Karl Skrade used to say, "our vices and virtues." Change comes when in the middle of the darkness the light shines, when we hear from God, "Arise, shine, your light has come; the glory of the Lord has risen upon you."

Here's the deal, folks. You and I live in light of a God with a really large heart, one that is stretched, one that makes it possible for our hearts to thrill and rejoice. In many ways, both the second lesson and the gospel reading are saying that. Ephesians is proclaiming the radical notion that the Gentiles (the nations, everybody else but the Jews) are part of God's movement in the world. They are included. Nobody, in other words, is left out.

And by the way, Ephesians would say, this is no new news. From the very beginning God has been working to bring all people together. That work has just been hidden; it has been a mystery. In Christ, the mystery has been revealed. All along, God has been working to bring the whole cosmos into unity. It's the old, old story. It's not just the New Testament story; it's also the Old Testament story. It's the story from before that. It's the story of creation. It's the story from before creation. The whole story is a story of love that desires to bring

everything and everybody into unity. It's just that we haven't *gotten* the story. It hadn't been revealed. But now the page has turned and the mystery has been disclosed. Everybody! Everything! In other words, God's heart is phenomenally large.

Now isn't it interesting who it is that grasps this? Sometimes not the inside folks. Sometimes not the church folks, the moral folks, sometimes not those who think they possess the story. This really is the meaning of the tale about the magi, the ones we often call "the wise men." Incidentally, the story doesn't call them "wise." What's more, it doesn't call them "kings," and it certainly doesn't say that there were three of them.

These guys were likely priests from a foreign religion—a religion known as Zoroastrianism. They were religious leaders who used the stars to predict the future, to ascertain where really significant leaders might be born. In Matthew's story, the star arose and shone in the sky, and it drew these foreigners to it. Something larger than they grasped them. And they were moved to respond. And they were led to worship and to bring gifts—gifts appropriate for a king, a different kind of a king, a king unlike King Herod whose kingship meant power and intimidation.

Without a doubt, these guys *were* really wise. But hear this: they were foreigners, Gentiles. It's the Gentiles who *get it* in this text. And the inside folks don't, especially those who are of power, those who think they possess the story.

The story belongs to God. The story is of a God whose heart is massive, whose heart has been stretched. The story is of a God whose love is always expanding, whose grace is always *including* more. Isn't it funny how much religion is about exclusion, but the Christ story is about just the opposite? This is the story of welcome. And it is this story that is after our hearts, this story that wants to grasp us and stretch our

hearts, to bring us to true joy, to the point where our lives rejoice and are thrilled.

But we won't get this story if we think we own it. We won't get this story if our need to control, our need to avoid vulnerability run our lives. We won't get this story if we think we can do it all on our own. We won't get this story if we don't recognize that the only way to sanity, the only way to true change is the awareness that there is a power greater than us. We won't get this story if we don't allow ourselves to follow the pattern of Jesus: the pattern of dying and rising. To get this story is to die to ourselves. Note how Matthew's story about the magi gets us thinking right away about the crucifixion of Jesus. The cross hangs over this story big time. It won't be long and the protectors of the power, people like Herod and the chief priest and the scribes, will be nailing Jesus to the cross.

This story, this story of love, isn't easy. Love will become bloody. To be grasped by this story is to be bloodied by it. It is to know that true life is only found as we let it go, as we die to ourselves, as we open ourselves up to Something greater than us. Then we will ready to be changed. Then our hearts will be enlarged, doing their best to keep up with the amazing large heart of God.