

Opening

Our scriptures this morning came to us from the prophet Isaiah and the gospel of Matthew. I think both of them give their readers something unexpected. I think they say that God wants something unexpected from them.

Isaiah: The Complaint

Let me start with Isaiah. You see, in Isaiah, the people come right out and say it. They've done the fasting. They have humbled themselves before God. They've done the things they knew to be pleasing to God. Yet God does not seem to have noticed. God seems distant. Silent.

The prophet Isaiah is filled with these heartbreaking moments, when people realize that they've had their faith all twisted up. Moments when they realize that God wants something different from their lives, that God is showing them what true faithfulness looks like. True faithfulness is not showy. It's not something you can do one day and then ignore the next.

In these words from the prophet, God reveals what God's desire is for God's people. That the faith of God's people should put an end to quarrels and strife. That the faith of God's people should break the chains of injustice. That the faith of God's people should set the oppressed free. That the faith of God's people should feed the hungry, shelter the wanderer, and clothe the naked.

How surprising it must have been for the Israelites to receive those words. How surprising to hear that all the time they spent praying in the temple, all the time they spent ritually cleansing themselves, all the meticulous following of the law, all of it was meaningless if it didn't include basic care of the marginalized, the stranger, and the least among us. How surprising Isaiah's words from God must have been.

Matthew 25: The Expected and the Unexpected

And then we turn to the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew 25 actually starts off, I think, by fulfilling expectations. I don't think it starts off very surprising. Jesus reveals what I think most people expected him to do: that he would come into his glory, surrounded by the angelic throng, and begin to separate the people.

I think people expected the Messiah to do something like that, to separate the good from the bad. At least going back to John the Baptist, who talked about the winnowing floor separating the wheat from the chaff.

So Matthew 25 starts out on the expectations of Jesus. Many people were expecting Jesus to separate the God-fearing on one side and everybody else on the other. Or maybe the

Jewish people on one side and the Gentiles on the other. Or maybe the Christ followers on one side and all the non-Christ followers on the other. It starts off with the expected: people will be separated.

But maybe not the way we expected after all.

Because I think in Jesus' day, and probably in ours as well, the vast majority of Christ followers believe that Jesus will separate the righteous from the wicked, and we tend to think we know how that is going to work. But Jesus goes on to suggest that the separation has nothing to do with those qualities.

The separation that Jesus is going to do has nothing to do with one's personal faith. The separation that Jesus is going to do has nothing to do with one's religious background. The separation that Jesus is going to do has nothing to do with one's family of origin.

How are people going to be separated by Christ? It will be based on how they have treated the least among us.

You see, Jesus goes right back to that surprising passage in Isaiah. Did you feed the hungry? Did you give drink to the thirsty? Did you clothe the naked?

Surprise, Jesus says. That's what the separation is based on.

I like that Matthew waits until the very end of the gospel to tell us this. This is not Matthew 2; this is Matthew 25. This is the end of the gospel. And Matthew reveals to us the criteria that Jesus is looking for almost as if to surprise us as we're reading it.

Did you think that just because you spent your days in the temple praying, you were going to be saved? Did you think that just because your attendance record at the synagogue was spotless, you would be among the most righteous of God? Did you think that just because you could trace your lineage all the way back to Abraham, that was going to be your salvation?

Surprise! It was always going to be about how you treated the hungry, the thirsty, the needy.

It Shouldn't Have Been a Surprise

Thing is, really, it shouldn't have been a surprise. Nobody listening to Jesus should have been surprised by his words. I think they probably were, but they shouldn't have been. The people hearing Jesus speak would have known the prophet Isaiah's words. They would have read what they were supposed to do. Hundreds of years before Jesus, the prophet Isaiah revealed how God wanted God's people to live. It shouldn't have been a surprise when Jesus said the exact same thing.

And yet I fear too often it is.

The Word "Seen"

The title I gave this sermon was "Seen the Least." And I want to say that the word seen in that title is doing all the heavy lifting. Because in our two scripture readings today, we have people who are having a hard time seeing.

Let me go back to Isaiah again. Did you listen to their complaint? The complaint of the Israelites is that they have done, or at least they think they have done, all the right things. Yet God has not seen them.

Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?

God's response to that is as beautiful, I think, as it is telling. God reveals that it's not God who has failed to see. God has seen all too clearly, in fact. God has seen the suffering. God has seen the casual indifference. God has seen the cruelty of the people who are called to be righteous.

In fact, it is the Israelite people who have not seen: the people who have turned their eyes from their neighbors, from the foreigners who reside in their land, from the hungry and those who have nowhere left to turn.

God accuses the Israelite people of the same thing they are accusing God of, almost inviting them to put themselves in the place of the least among them who are asking the same question. Does no one see our plight? Our suffering? Our hurting?

And the idea of seeing plays into the Gospel passage as well. When Jesus separates the sheep and the goats, neither group has seen what they did to deserve their placement. We're going to talk about this a little more over the next couple of weeks. But their question to Jesus, when they are put into their categories, is: When did we do these things for you? When did we see you hungry? When did we see you thirsty? When did we see you naked?

And Jesus says, when you have seen it among the least, you have seen it in me.

That is the delicious irony of this passage. Sometimes we spend so much energy trying to see Jesus only to come up short, yet fail to look into the places where Jesus has told us he is going to be: among the least, the last, and the lost.

Where We Choose to See God

Last week we finished our Season of Creation worship series with a message about God showing up before we do, talking about Paul going into Athens and finding that God had

shown up there before he did. We talked about how God is revealed in all things because all things are of God.

Maybe today I can build on that a little bit. Maybe we have the ability to see God in all things. But also, I think where we choose to see God matters.

If we choose to see God only in the cathedrals, God tends to be small enough to fit in them. If we choose to see God only in the pages of our Bibles, God tends to shrink to fit within just those pages. Even if we choose to see God in something like the grand expanse of the universe or the endless seas, God tends to become distant to us, almost meaningless to us.

I think when we choose to see God in the least among us, it forces us to see God in places we might otherwise have overlooked. It forces us to recognize that God is present in the hardest places, and that we can't just walk by and turn a blind eye, because when we do, we miss seeing our God.

Isn't that the message of the incarnation? That God would choose to enter the world, to be in the painful and hurting places of the world, to choose to be with us.

I think in Matthew 25, Jesus offers that invitation to us now. Just as Jesus chose to be among the least of us, Jesus invites us into those places as well. So rather than walk by the hungry and the thirsty and the needy, we are invited to stop, to be in those spaces, and to see God in them.

What a powerful invitation to us. Yes, we can see God in all things, but sometimes we have to choose where we're looking. And when we choose to look into the marginalized spaces of this world, sometimes we are surprised at the God we find there.

What an invitation for us today.

Closing Prayer

Beloveds, let us be in a moment of prayer together.

Holy One, we have a lot of need on our streets. We have a lot of need in our soup kitchens. We have a lot of need in our community, a lot that we might call the least among us. Lord, help us to choose to see you there. And help us, in so choosing to see, to act in ways that acknowledge your presence.

In Christ, I pray.

Amen.