

Our God is a “Big Picture” God*Isaiah 56:1,6-8*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In a rough hewn cabin along the Natchez Trace, a desperate man pondered his life. Convinced that it had amounted to nothing, certain that he had failed to provide adequately for his family, embarrassed that he hadn't delivered what his boss was looking for, he took his own life. Had he known that his discoveries would change the course of one of history, had he realized that the diary of what he had done would bring in enough money to provide for his family for generations, had he understood that his boss, Thomas Jefferson, was thrilled by what he had accomplished, perhaps the life Meriwether Lewis, the “Lewis” of “Lewis and Clark” fame, would not have come to such an end. It can be frustrating, in this case tragic, when you can't see the big picture.

That can be especially true for us Christians as we strive to carry out our mission here on earth. But maybe first we need to remind ourselves what that mission is. Why doesn't God beam us up to heaven right now? That would be much more fun right? Why leave us here – to bring others to know Jesus and what he has done; that's why God leaves us here. He wants a full heaven. We carry out that mission by being lights (doing what is right in God's eyes), and being witnesses (sharing the good news that Jesus has opened heaven to all). But we question that mission don't we? “God it's hard enough to share the message with my own kids and have them listen, how on earth is it supposed to work with my buddy that hasn't set one foot in a church since he was 5?” “God how do you expect me to do what is right in your eyes when almost all my friends don't think your instructions are right?” “God, how am I supposed to witness to my classmates when even my teachers are ready to jump down my throat if I mention you?” Whether we say it out loud or think it, it's easy to question the mission that God gives us, or to ignore it, or to give up. And it's often because we just don't see the big picture.

In the verses before us this morning give us a view of God's game plan revealed through His prophet Isaiah. And even though they were written thousands of years ago, they are words that I'm convinced will comfort us when living as a light and a witness is hard and will inspire us do carry out our life's mission with greater zeal.

Isaiah 56:1 This is what the LORD says: "Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed.6 And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to serve him, to love the name of the LORD, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant--7 these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations." 8 The Sovereign LORD declares-- he who gathers the exiles of Israel: "I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered."

These may not seem particularly pertinent or relevant at first glance. But you'll see how they are when you remember some things about Isaiah. I can't imagine that I would be here today if your call to me had said, “Please come and minister to the people here, they are stubborn, they won't listen to God's word, most of what you say will just further harden their hearts.” That's pretty much a description of Isaiah's call, and God made that clear when he called him. Isaiah endured both the national and spiritual decline of his people. He observed as the brutal Assyrian army carted away his Jewish brothers and sisters from the Northern 10 tribes of Israel in 722 BC. In his home territory, the southern Kingdom of Judah, he endured the transition from Hezekiah, one of the last God-fearing kings to Manasseh – one of the worst, who went so far as to sacrifice his own child to the pagan God Moloch. “Yes Isaiah.” It's as if God was saying, “You go carry out my work, but you aren't going to see much in the way of results.” I don't know about you, but that would be enough to sink my ministry! So how did Isaiah do it? How did he keep going? God showed him the big picture.

“**Maintain justice and do what is right.**” God says in verse 1, “Yes Isaiah, you go on, you live as a light, you witness for me! And here's why: *verse one continues* “**for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed.**” And with verses 6-8, God describes in detail just how successful his plan will ultimately be. It would be better than bringing Israel back to world prominence, better than the return of the Assyrian exiles, even better than having all the Jewish people return to him spiritually. God share with Isaiah that people from all nations will be in heaven. It's as if he's saying to Isaiah, remember the big picture “No the people right in front of you might not listen, but I'm still going to do what I promised, and it's going to be better than anything you could imagine.” Isaiah relied on the comfort of a “Big Picture” God, and that's the comfort we need to rely on too because living as lights and being God's witnesses, is still sometimes discouraging.

The pastor laments, “I keep preaching, but fewer and fewer show up to hear.” The parent or teacher says, “I'm bringing my child up training him in God's paths, but look at how he's living!” The employee says “I brought up religion with a co-worker, and now my boss is threatening to fire me.” “God if I confront my friend about the affair he's having, he might never talk to me again.” The student says, “I shared my faith with my roommate and now she constantly makes

fun of me for it.” “God I’ve watched others do it, I’ve seen what’s happened to them, I just don’t think I can do it.” “Doing what’s right, being a witness – it just seems like a waste of time. Where are the results?”

When those thoughts come to your mind, remember that God has promised to use everything we do for the benefit of his kingdom. Then think back to the “Big Picture” promise he made to Isaiah. Did God deliver? Did He send his salvation and reveal his righteousness? Sure, when he sent Jesus 2000 years ago. Has God brought forgiveness and eternal life to people of all nations like he promised Isaiah? Just look in the mirror! Not many of Jewish origin among us are there? God delivered, and if the “Big Picture” God delivered on his promise to Isaiah, certainly that same “Big Picture” God will deliver on his promise that our words and actions will be beneficial even when we might not see it at the time? Rely on that comfort when it’s tough living your mission, and then get busy. Embrace the challenge of serving a “Big Picture” God.

Isaiah’s ministry didn’t suddenly get easier, but he did find satisfaction in embracing the challenges of that ministry. He was able to support and encourage to King Hezekiah. Though they were a minority, there were those that listened to God and he strengthened and encouraged them. Even in the darkest days of Israel, there were even prophets being trained who were willing to carry on after him. And consider this, although very few listened to Isaiah’s words when he spoke them, but just think how many have heard God’s promises through Isaiah over the millennia since then and trusted them- including us? What Christian isn’t familiar with Isaiah 53? That’s quite a legacy.

Isaiah embraced the challenge of serving a “Big Picture” God, and now it’s our turn. Yes, you may have to wait till heaven to see how God used your efforts that seemed so futile at the time, but God has a way of giving us just enough to be amazed while we are still here.

You maybe have heard of or even listened to Jacob, a WELS member and former Muslim speak. His story is amazing. I’ve heard it a number of times, and when he tells it he always talks about the phone call he received from a member of one of our churches. I’d like to know the story of that phone caller. How many hang ups, how many answering machines, did he or she ever think God might do something like this through that phone call? That caller may have felt that his or her work was a waste of time, but God knew the big picture. I think of my own first year of ministry in Holiday, FL. I tried to go door to door each Saturday to talk with people from the neighborhood. Lots of friendly people, but not one came from that first year– till four years later. I confirmed that family about 3 years ago now. I’ll confess there were days when I thought it a waste of time, God knew the big picture. I think of a member, Bonnie, at 80 years old was constantly sharing her savior with others, last year one of her friends finally commit to AIC, came once, then said she didn’t want to come any more. Bonnie was crushed, I was disappointed too. But Bonnie kept plugging away, and surprisingly her friend kept coming to church; three months ago her friend had surgery. And where she used to tell Bonnie, “Just cross my fingers,” when Bonnie offered to pray for her, this time she asked Bonnie to say a prayer. We thought all our efforts were a waste of time, but God knew the big picture. It was worth embracing the challenge!

And consider for a moment how you came to know Jesus? I don’t know how far back I have to go, but some time somewhere in my history my ancestors were unbelievers probably part of some European Germanic barbarian tribe somewhere. And I don’t know who it was, but God placed a challenge before someone to share the message of forgiveness with that Germanic barbarian. I can’t guess that it was easy to do, but that someone, whom I’ll meet in heaven one day, witnessed and as a result, my great grand-father and his father, and his father, and on down the line know Jesus. Each of you has a similar story. Now, what if that person upon meeting you or your ancestor had said nothing? What if they had not embraced the challenge?

What challenge has God placed in your life? Maybe it’s your depressed college roommate. Maybe it’s your co-worker who was just diagnosed with the big “C”. Maybe it’s your confirmation class friend who hasn’t been here since confirmation Sunday. Maybe it’s the woman from another country that just started at your office. Maybe it’s your own son or daughter. Embrace that challenge! No more “the time just wasn’t right.” No more, “I’m just afraid what I say might come our wrong.” No more, “Well, she’ll never talk to me again.” Embrace the challenge, do what God put you here to do. Live as a light, share the only gift, the only friendship that lasts forever.

Yes, you might run into barriers, yes, and it will sometimes seem like a waste of time, but when it does think back to Isaiah, and remember, we have a “big picture” God and no matter how useless our efforts might seem right now, he is using every act of love, every word of witness that we utter to put more people in heaven.

AMEN