

## A New Perspective

November 18, In the Year of Our LORD, 2007

Gates Presbyterian Church

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Isaiah 12; 65:17-25

An “elephant in the room” is an idiom for a truth people would just as soon ignore. An elephant, particularly in a small room, *should* be impossible to overlook. The point is that for a whole host of reasons people might not want to admit a truth staring them in the face.

Jesus was no coward. He called and named things as He saw them. He did not hesitate to challenge the status quo or confront the powers-that-were. Jesus, the man, may not have seen an actual elephant, but he was always sure to “name the elephant in the room.”

An “elephant in the room” today is that although this is *Thanksgiving* Sunday, some might find it difficult to be in a “thanksgiving state of mind.” As many of us prepare our hearts and minds for this afternoon’s Calling Hours and Memorial Service for Ryan Simm, we know we are called to celebrate his nineteen years of life, but his untimely death reminds us how fragile and vulnerable all of us are, how life is fraught with questions, losses, and the nerve racking knowledge that loved ones with us today might very well be gone tomorrow.

Other “elephants in the room” today are the realizations that

- although we are called to be a people of peace, we live in a time of war;
- although we are summoned to put our trust in God, all too often we place our trust in things, in possessions;
- although we are to be a people grounded in faith that professes that God works for good, we are disheartened because we live in a time of turmoil, unrest, questions and upheaval;
- although we know that God blesses creation with *incredible* abundance, we realize that the world’s resources are distributed all too unevenly, that while a few have amassed wealth beyond belief, the vast majority of the globe’s people live in terrible want and need;
- although we celebrate the mission and ministry of our “cloud of witnesses,” the faithful persons of this congregation who have died and are now with God, we realize how much we miss their presence and their commitment of time and talent and resources.

Our faith is not so idealistic and ethereal as to not recognize that human perspectives are real. Realities can be harsh and that, too, is an “elephant in the room.” We can’t just wave our hand, claim that God will simply make all things new and fresh and move on as though life does not have moments of despair, hurt, frustration, loss, helplessness and even hopelessness.

To be sure, Jesus was not the first person we find in Scripture to be blunt or direct when the safe thing to do would have been to keep silent and not name the “elephant in the room!” How much safer it would have been for the prophet Nathan to not confront King David about David’s adultery with Bathsheba! How much easier for prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah to not tell rulers of Israel and Judea that because of the nations’ sinfulness, God appointed foreign armies to destroy the Promised Land! John the Baptist would have lived longer had he not invoked the ire of Queen Herodias by calling her an adulteress! Instead, Nathan challenged David to his face,

Isaiah and Jeremiah preached a very unpopular message and John the Baptist preached a call to repentance that named the sins, named the sinners and ... ignored the consequences. He *literally* lost his head.

While a human perspective might be to surrender to human emotions, human reactions and even the human tendency to ignore something unpleasant in hopes it will just go away, that is not God's perspective and it behooves us as Christians to be faithful in all we face. The lectionary readings from the Old Testament today are an interesting combination from the words of Isaiah. Instead of a reading from the Book of Psalms, we have a song that is a psalm found in the midst of Isaiah's words. The twelfth chapter of Isaiah isn't the shortest in the Book of Isaiah, but it is unique. In addition to some verses from the eleventh chapter, the words of Isaiah 12, words of praise and thanksgiving, sit right smack in the middle of some of the harsher words in Scripture. In chapters that come before and after, the rulers and people of Israel and Judea are upbraided for their unfaithfulness. Through Isaiah, God spoke harsh words about social injustice, about the haughtiness and arrogance of the rich and powerful, of how unfruitful the people were in giving back to God of their time and talent, of their dependence on military alliances and armaments ... of the sinfulness of God's own people. Many of the words in these first chapters of Isaiah are hardly uplifting, but they present a perspective of the Almighty God that calls people to account for their deeds and misdeeds.

Then, in the midst of God's complaints and admonitions about faithlessness, come a pleasant surprise in Isaiah 11 and 12. The words of Isaiah 11 are echoed in Isaiah 65 which were the other part of our reading this morning – and in those words we witness the perspective of God that despite our missteps, despite human sinfulness, despite the harsh realities of so many peoples' lives, despite the difficulties we sometimes bring on ourselves, there are other words, other perspectives, other promises that engender hope, praise, and thanksgiving. The twelfth chapter's praise is mirrored in the words of Psalm 100 that we just sang. And what about the promises of Isaiah 11 and 65? We hear words about a "new heaven and a new earth," of rejoicing, and those seemingly incredible promises of peace that suggests that in God's reign "the wolf and the lamb shall feed together."

Our Co-Presbyter, Elder Linda Badger Becker, composes e-mails with footnotes that are so timely! The one in her e-mails this week include words of a Katie Cashwell who writes:

Our highest calling as Christians is to participate in the revolution that Christ calls us to by caring for those that the rest of the world forgets, being present to those in dire need during crisis, and letting God's love and mercy come from the light that we shine.

Therein lies the rub and the challenge.

- Called to be a people of peace who live in a time of war, the church needs to be the place where we are in conversation about the current conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, about the theories of "just war," and about what it means for a military to be preemptive in the face of perceived dangers.
- Called to put our trust in God, the church needs to be the place where we are in conversation about how people put all the more trust in things, in possessions, in what it means to go home yesterday and pick up TIME Magazine's "Luxury Supplement" as though the jewelry and purses that cost tens of thousands of dollars are something we can not live without.

- Called to embrace a faith that professes that God works for good, the church needs to be the place where we are in conversation about how we can lift the spirits of those who are disheartened in times of turmoil, loss, death, unrest and upheaval.
- Called to share the bounty so many of us apparently claim as our birthright, the church needs to be the place where we are in conversation about how global inequities and injustice can be challenged if not corrected.
- Called to celebrate the ministry of our “cloud of witnesses,” those faithful person of this congregation who have died and are now with God, the church needs to be the place where we are in conversation about how we are going to realize that in addition to missing their presence, we miss their stewardship of time and talent and resources – and that is our turn to step up and be counted as those who hear the call of God on our lives.

In a few moments, we come to that moment when we present our commitments of stewardship for the coming year. While recognizing there are many other priorities in our lives, we will, in the context of prayer and faith and devotion, embrace a new perspective that confronts the world’s realities boldly and with confidence and that tells us, in no uncertain terms, that the God Who brought Jesus back from the dead is victorious over all things.

- We need the perspective of God that challenges the despair that comes with the loss of a young person like Ryan whose smile we ever remember. ....
- We need the perspective of God that challenges the drumbeats of war with achievable visions of peace. ....
- We need the perspective of God that challenges the commercial world’s invitation to grab more and then even more of things we don’t *really* need. ....
- We need the perspective of God that challenges the energy that goes into distrust and anxiety that might so much better be applied to the ways of hope. ....
- We need the perspective of God that challenges our sense of entitlement to the world’s energy and the world’s resources when there really is more than enough to go around to meet the true needs of God’s people. ....
- We need the perspective of God that challenges us to remember the “cloud of witnesses” that have gone on before, so that we will do all we can in the ways of mission and ministry; time, talent and financial gifts ... so that in decades to come, we will be counted among the faithful “cloud of witnesses” that confirmed the future of Christ’s church. ....

When all is said and done, those perspectives are not all that *new*. They are the perspectives announced and proclaimed by the likes of Isaiah who spoke over twenty-seven hundred years ago, of Jesus whose public ministry was two millennia ago – and the perspective embraced by those of Gates Presbyterian Church in these past one hundred and eighty years and as recently as ... right *now*.

Amen.