



**Worship Series: “Expecting Grace”**

“Sent with a Vision”—Sermon Text: Matthew 11:7-11

FUMC Arlington, Texas 76011

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent: 11 December 2016

**“Where there is no vision the people perish”**

—(Proverbs 29:18).

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Hear the day’s lesson:

2 When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples 3 and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

4 Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5 the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. 6 And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

7 As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? 8 What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. 9 What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’ 11 Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he (Matthew 11:2-11).

My friend, the late Rodney Wilmoth, former pastor of the Hennepin Avenue UMC in Minneapolis related an amusing and true story. He said he was flying Northwestern Airlines out of Minnesota one afternoon. Yet the plane sat on the tarmac for about ninety minutes. Finally, the pilot came over the loud speaker and announced that the plane had lost its place in the line of planes to depart and so they were returning to the gate to check some equipment. Rod said there were the usual passengers’ complaints and good-natured grumbling, but they all disembarked in an orderly fashion—except one man in the first class section of the plane.

Rod was one of the last off the plane and as he made his way to the door he overheard the captain speak to the man in the first class section who did not seem to be getting off the

plane. The captain said, “Well Jack, are you just going to sit there or are you going to go into the terminal until we are ready to get going?”

It was then that Rod noticed that the man called Jack was blind. So his reply to his friend the captain was all the more interesting. He said, “Captain, I don’t feel like getting off the plane, but my dog could sure use a break.”

So the captain slipped on some dark glasses and took Jack’s Seeing Eye dog down the gangplank and on into the terminal.

Now I’m not completely certain of how the uniformed airline pilot with a seeing-eye dog was received in the terminal, but I have my guesses. Whatever this story suggests, it does suggest that in some aspects of life, vision is a crucial element. Few of us would deny it. Most of us agree that people who are visually handicapped should not operate a motor vehicle out of concern for the safety of others on the streets and highways. Likewise, skilled surgeons often use special glasses while performing surgery to enhance their vision. In the 18th and 19th centuries on the American frontier, good vision was a necessity for straight shooting to kill game and to protect life and property in the backcountry of our American West. We could name hundreds of feats that we cannot do without good or at least adequate vision. Vision is a key element in much of life.

Yoked to our Matthew lesson is Isaiah 35. This is Isaiah’s vision that speaks to what God will do to heal a wounded creation and how God will also rescue a disabled humanity represented by Israel. In the long and often aching history of Judaism, there are three epochs that stand out from all others. The latest of these is, of course, the Nazi Holocaust of European Jews in the 1930s and the 1940s. Most of us know of this troubling aspect of Jewish history popularized by modern art and cinema. Even those in their late teens know about the Holocaust from films as *Schindler’s List* or “made for television” movies like Herman Wouk’s *War and Remembrance*. Some of our more precocious readers have searched *The Diaries of Ann Frank*.

Likewise, most Sunday school folk, and others who have paid attention over the years

to the story of the Hebrew people, know well the trials and adversity of the Jews in Egypt. The Exodus story chronicles the chosen people's first taste of oppression which becomes a regular feature of Jewish life. Whether in Egypt or Germany or Spain, anti-Semitism has plagued Jews for three thousand years. Isaiah 35 records Jewish bondage in the foreign land of Babylon. The Babylonian captivity is the second major epoch of oppression against the Jews.

After the time of the united monarchy under the leadership of Saul, David, and Solomon, the nation split into Northern and Southern kingdoms. The first two leaders were Jereboam and Reoboam. After a time, Assyria dismantled the Northern kingdom. Assyria was the great super-power of the era. Later, the Southern kingdom succumbed to the subsequent super-power, Babylonia. This world super-power deported about ten percent of Judah's leadership into captivity to Babylon and Susa. In these foreign cities, the Jews tried to forge new religious understandings without the temple that had previously guided its religious life.

Most people know that there are basically two responses to the bleak and oppressive settings life presents: despair or hope. It all depends on one's faith vision and perspective. For an example of vision a shoe salesman went to a remote country. Upon arrival, he was dismayed because everyone went around barefooted. So he wired the company, "No prospect for sales. People don't wear shoes here."

Later another salesman went to the same country. He too immediately sent word to the home office. But his telegram read, "Great potential! People don't wear shoes here!" A person's vision depends on a person's outlook. For Jews and Christians the biblical witness reminds each of us about that largely untapped resource we call faith.

Israel's misery in exile is best captured in its Psalm 137:

[137:1] By the rivers of Babylon--  
there we sat down and there we wept  
when we remembered Zion.

[2] On the willows there  
we hung up our harps.

[3] For there our captors  
asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

[4] How could we sing the Lord’s song  
in a foreign land?

[5] If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
let my right hand wither!

[6] Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,  
if I do not remember you,  
if I do not set Jerusalem  
above my highest joy (Psalm 137:1-6).

Either despair or hope is a possible answer that could be given to the question: “How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” Many of the most hope-filled texts in Isaiah attempt to answer this melancholy question: “How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137:4). Isaiah invites Jewish listeners to the joyous anticipation that God is about to enter Israel’s life again, for the sake of Jerusalem’s well-being. This is what Christmas offers Christians—the opportunity to anticipate that God will re-enter our lives once again.

Oren Arnold offers wise people some very practical Christmas gift suggestions:

To your enemy, forgiveness.

To an opponent, tolerance.

To a friend, your heart.

To a customer, service.

To all, charity.

To every child, a good example.

To yourself, respect.