

Lenten Sermon Series: Preparing for the New Creation-“The Big Picture”

Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9; Psalm 63:1-8

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Today is the third Sunday in Lent. We are about half way through this journey to the cross during this season of Lent. So far we have talked about the challenges and we have lamented over our challenges, but more importantly we are discovering, perhaps for the first time or in a new way that God is with us. Today through the lectionary scriptures that were read, we hopefully will realize that what we see is not even close to what God sees. And what we know is far from what God knows.

Do we even see what another sees? When we look at an object, we see it perfectly if we have 20-20 vision. When our vision is impaired, we will see the object differently. If we are color blind, the object will appear differently, as well. Also, we can look at an object with our eyes, but if we put that object under a microscope we will see another aspect of the object as a small piece of it is magnified. Tana Hoban, a photographer and creator of children’s books, has taken pictures of ordinary objects and covered the pictures with a black sheet of paper. In the middle of the sheet is a hole. The viewer then can only see a small portion of the picture. Children have fun guessing what the picture might be. Then when the page is turned the entire image can be seen.

As I read the Isaiah and Luke passages this week, I am reminded that only God sees the big picture. All we see is what is revealed to us through a small peephole. This can be very frustrating especially when we are going through dark times, such as a loss, crisis, conflict, or catastrophe. We only see a small part of the whole picture, but God sees the whole picture. Out of our helplessness, lack of control, devastation, or anger, we might want to and often do blame someone else. We are really good at blaming others. When a doctor can’t save a loved one, some will blame the doctor. When natural catastrophes occur, we might blame climate change or our lifestyle that causes climate change. When someone whose heart is filled with hate decides to go into a crowd and shoot the masses, we might blame the system that didn’t help a disturbed person or a system that allowed a disturbed person to obtain a military style weapon. We are very good at pointing the finger at something or someone. We play the Blame Game because the one who is blamed loses and we, the blamers, become the victors. When in reality those who play the Blame Game are only seeing a very small part of God’s Big Picture. We spend a lot of time on blaming and spend little-to-no time trying to see what God sees, trying to feel what God feels, or attempting to discern what God knows.

When I read the Isaiah passage, I see prisoners of war who were taken from their homeland after it was destroyed by war. They grieved their loss. At first they blamed their captors and God, but then they began look at themselves and how their behavior got them to this point. They began to cut a bigger hole to see the bigger picture. What they saw saddened them. They saw how they had ignored God and God’s law. They saw how they focused on themselves and abandoned the covenant their ancestors made with God. They began to see their exile as God’s “time-out” period, a time out to think and renew their relationship with God. Isaiah who prophesized that they would be conquered as well as comforted them while in Exile, now as they are returning offers them promises from God as well as sound advice, “As you return home, I will provide for you. No worries, but remember this. Listen carefully. You are still my people and I am your God. As you become a new nation, remember to keep your focus on me. Seek me. Return to me. I am merciful and will forgive. All who are selfish, greedy, and harm others, all who ignore me, if they return to me, I will forgive. Because I see what you cannot see. I see the big picture. I see the potential in each person. I see the hope of this new Israel.” This entire passage is an example of God’s great generosity. God could have destroyed the entire nation, but saved this remnant and then gave them this second chance. God not only promises a second chance, but promises to provide for them if they return to God and seek forgiveness. This group of people had some spiritual work to do as they set out for their homeland and become a new creation.

In our Gospel lesson, this theme of seeing the Big Picture and second chances occurs again. The passage begins with a report of a mass killing of Jewish Galileans at the Temple by Pilate, the Roman governor. They were slaughtered as their animals were being slaughtered for a sacrifice. Killing masses of people while worshipping is not a new phenomenon. How does Jesus react to this news? Does he play the blame game? Does he blame the Temple guards for not protecting the Galilean worshippers? Does he blame the Roman political system? Does he organize this group to go into Jerusalem to kill Pilate for slaughtering his brothers and sisters in faith? No, Jesus doesn't play the Blame Game, nor does he seek retaliation. Neither belongs to the character of Jesus. He doesn't even claim that these people were murdered because they sinned. A common belief at the time was that God punished people for their sinful ways; even killed people for being abhorrent sinners. Remember Job's friends who kept telling Job that he must have done something wrong. They said that God was punishing Job. This belief only sees a small portion of the God's Big Picture. Instead, Jesus cuts the hole a little bit larger so we can begin to see the picture that God sees. Jesus turns this belief on its head by teaching that God does not punish us for our sins. Each person is precious to God. Each person is responsible for their own behavior. Each person is to repent to God for his/her own sins, to turn away from whatever keeps our focus away from God, and to turn away from words and actions that harm others. Repentance means to turn around or turn away from beliefs and actions that harm and turn towards God. God's grace forgives and gives us another chance.

One lady complained to the pastor about all the gossiping she overheard in church and told the pastor that she had to do something about it. The pastor asked the lady to bring her a full glass of water. The lady did. Then the pastor asked her to walk around the church holding that glass of water and not spill a drop. She did. When she returned the pastor asked her if she heard any gossip. She replied that she was focused on not spilling the water and heard nothing. The pastor told her to keep her focus on Jesus like she kept her focus on the water and she will not hear any gossip. Keep our focus on Jesus. This advice keeps us from harming others so that we can see more of what God sees than what humans see.

Jesus continues with a parable of a fig tree that isn't producing fruit. The focus is not on Jesus, but on what Jesus is willing to do for us. The owner wants the gardener to get rid of the tree. The gardener wants a chance to work with the tree, dig around the roots to aerate them and add some fertilizer. Jesus never tells us if after all this work, the tree produces fruit. Perhaps that's not the point of the story. The point is that the gardener is willing to go the extra mile to save the fig tree, and advocates for every chance be given to the fig tree. Jesus is the Gardener who goes the extra mile to save us so we can produce the fruit of love, forgiveness, grace, and acceptance that is nurtured in us. That's a larger view of the Big Picture.

We are not given the ability to see the entirety of the Big Picture in this lifetime, but Jesus' life, death, and resurrection cuts that hole a little bit larger for us to see a little more of what God sees. And what we see stops us in our tracks. We stop seeing what others have done or should be doing. Instead we see our own log in our eye, our own sin. We see that we are to turn back to God. We see that we are to ask forgiveness so we can become new creations in Christ. When we see a bigger portion of the picture we begin to realize what the Serenity Prayer states: "Lord, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Praying the Serenity Prayer will help us see as God sees.

The Psalmist wanted to see a larger part of the God's Big Picture, too, when he wrote, "I search for you, I thirst for you." And as a larger part of the God's picture was revealed he gave thanks to God, blessed God, and was fully satisfied with seeing that much of the Big Picture.

Reflection Questions: How much of God's Big Picture do you see? What gets in the way of seeing a larger portion of God's picture? Can you turn away from what gets in the way and turn around to God, receive forgiveness and a second chance? And when a larger part of the Big Picture is revealed don't forget to give God the glory and give God thanks.

Resources: *Lent: The Gift of New Creation* by Thomas Ehrich